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BLUE RIBBON WESTERN

Volume 9

August, 1946

Number 2

COMPLETE Powder Valley NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

THE ROAD TO LARAMIE By Peter Field 10

Sam Sloan didn't cotton to the idea of being taken for a gent who'd become so downright tame and peaceful that he'd run from trouble instead of running after it. But the offer that the Pony Express district superintendant made was a right agreeable one otherwise—then Sam found that the job wasn't going to be the uneventful routine it seemed. Only Sam was doggoned if he was going to stand and watch peaceful hombres murdered!

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FUNERAL O'NEIL — DEVIL'S UNDERTAKER

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Someone was playing with dynamite and playing for keeps. But Funeral O'Neil and his partner, Ringbone Smith, could play, too, with their own particular brand of dynamite!

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Some facts about a little word that helped fill graveyards in the old west.

WHILE THE HANGNOOSE WAITS ... By Brett Austin 82

You'd think a hombre who'd seen a killer hanged, and who'd been downright impressed by the spectacle, would have learned something from it!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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The Russian beat his chest at the injustice of Stranch's decision.

Things had come to one dang fine pass, thought Sam Sloan, when he was being selected for a new job on the supposed grounds of being a dependable, peaceful hombre — one who'd avoid trouble. But the job turned out to be anything but peaceful, and Sam was no man to try to live up to a false impression!

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE Pony Express relay station, ten miles south of Dutch Springs in southern Colorado, lay silent and seemingly deserted in the hot morning sunlight. It was in a desolate and barren section of the state, on the edge of the upper slope of Powder Valley, and the station itself consisted of a drab

little three-room shack with a leanto kitchen built on the back; with corals and saddle shed behind that.

A tall, rangy Westerner came strolling from behind the saddle shed, leading a saddled horse behind him. Howie Ellis tugged on a leather thong looped around his belt and pulled a watch from his Levis. He studied it a moment, then shaded his eyes against the glare of sunlight to peer intently up the road leading south from Dutch Springs. At that precise instant a cloud of white dust showed in the distance.

Howie pocketed his watch with a grunt of approval. He turned and grinned at a gingham-clad woman who had come to the front door of the way station. "Yonder he shows, right on tuh dot, Miz Sloan," he drawled. "Sam never has let us down on his end of it yet."

By **PETER FIELD**

Magazine
Of This
Powder
Novel



Pretty, blonde Kitty Sloan nodded her head and smiled; she had been married to Sam Sloan for more than a year but had never gotten over the thrill of watching her husband thunder up with the south-bound mail to transfer the bags to the waiting rider on a fresh mount. During all that time, no matter what the weather or the road conditions, Sam had never been one moment late.

A small black speck became discernible in front of the cloud of white dust. It took on the shape of a straining horse and hunched rider, and then the pound of driving hoofbeats reached their ears.

Howie gathered up the reins and

swung into the saddle. He lifted his big floppy Stetson to Kitty Sloan in the doorway and then rode out to the edge of the road. His fast bay tossed its head and seemed to crouch a little with tense muscles as Sam galloped up.

Sam didn't slacken speed until he was ten feet from the waiting rider. Then he reined up and his lathered roan came to a sliding stop with all four legs set rigidly. Sam quickly loosened the twenty-pound *mochila*—the leather skirt with the mail pouches that rested over the saddle—and he flung it across Howie's bay.

As soon as he felt the weight of the pouches, the bay lunged forward

eagerly. Sam pushed his hat back and watched the fresh rider disappear in front of another cloud of white dust southward. He made a solemn rite of dragging out his watch and scrutinizing it anxiously. He swung off his roan and nodded to Kitty as she came out the door to meet him. "Minute ahead of time," he announced proudly.

Kitty Sloan laughed softly as she held up her face for his kiss. "I believe you'd go off and shoot yourself if you were ever a minute late."

"It's pretty important," Sam argued. "Folks pay big money tuh git their mail on schedule, though I dunno what's in them letters tuh make it wuth five dollars each to git 'em so fast."

He put his arm about Kitty's slender waist and walked with her toward the door, leading his winded horse. "How's the young-un this mornin'?"

HE TRIED to keep his voice casual, as though he wasn't particularly interested, as though four-months-old Sammy Ezra Sloan wasn't the most important thing in the world to him.

Kitty laughed softly and disengaged herself from his arm as they reached the door. "Sammy's taking a nap just as he should be. I'll have breakfast ready by the time you put up your horse and get washed. And come in quietly so you won't wake Sammy."

Sam said indignantly, "Shore. You know I allus come in quiet." Though it was mid-morning when he ended his ride, Sam always waited for breakfast until he got home where Kitty could fix it for him. After years of eating his own cooking, or batching with Pat Stevens or Ezra, Sam's stomach was insulted every time he had to eat any food that wasn't prepared by Kitty. That was the only thing he didn't like about his job of riding the Pony Express. It took him away from home every other night and he had to eat a meal at the hotel in Dutch Springs.

He went on toward the corral hoping Kitty would have pancakes again this morning. Sam felt mighty happy and contented as he unsaddled

the roan and used a handful of hay to wipe the sweat and lather from his back. He reckoned he was just about the most contented guy in the whole world. Seemed to him like he never wanted anything else than to stay right here and ride the mail the rest of his life.

It was funny too, the way he had always hankered after danger and action in the past before he married Kitty. Back in those other days he and Pat Stevens and one-eyed Ezra had made up a hard-riding, fast-shooting trio who administered their own rough ideas of justice wherever they met evil in the West; and they had played a major role in the taming of Powder Valley. Things began to change after Pat married Sally and settled down on the Lazy Mare ranch at the upper end of the Valley, though the three continued to go out on occasional forays when danger threatened the peace of the community.

Now, all three of them were settled down and it seemed like there wouldn't ever be any more excitement. Though not married, red-headed Ezra had recently acquired a spread of his own near the Lazy Mare.

HE STOPPED at the pump near the kitchen door, and worked it up and down vigorously. Cold water gushed out of the spout and he set a pan to catch it, then rolled up his sleeves and turned his shirt collar down inside.

He took a square cake of soap and lathered his leathery face and forearms then doused his head in the water, sputtering and blowing to get rid of the perfumed scent that Kitty insisted on adding to her home-made soap.

"Doggoned stinkin' stuff," he muttered to himself with a frown as he dried his face, though he was secretly pleased with this curiously feminine peculiarity of Kitty's.

He heard her call, "Breakfast's on," from the kitchen door, and he blinked at her standing there holding the door open for him.

He'd be doggoned if she didn't make a pretty picture in the doorway.

Her figure was rounded and supple, no longer girlish, but soft and graceful in maturity. She had always been pretty, but being married and having a baby had made Kitty beautiful.

She turned to the stove as Sam reached the door, and he sniffed deeply at the tantalizing odor of bubbling flapjacks on the fire. The small table was immaculate with a clean white cloth on it, and a mug of steaming coffee waited Sam at his place. A little bowl of blue wildflowers added a touch of color to the center of the table and it seemed to Sam like everything was mighty near perfect.

Kitty slid a plate holding three crisply browned pancakes on it in front of him and said, "Butter those while I get a can of sirup. Or. . ." She paused with her hand extended toward the cupboard, "... maybe you'd rather have some of my wild cherry jam."

Sam was sliding thick slabs of freshly churned butter between the hot cakes. He said, "You know dog-gone well I want jam. I kin get sirup in town on my flapjacks."

Kitty laughed and handed him down a jar of cherry jam. She turned to the stove and deftly slid a pancake onto her plate and ladled more batter into the hot skillet. She never ate her own breakfast until Sam got home because it was so much more companionable that way.

She sat down opposite him and smiled tenderly at the way he was wolfing down his food. He didn't have very good table manners, and his swarthy face certainly wasn't pretty, but Kitty was convinced she was married to the finest man in the world.

The high, thin wall of a child came into the kitchen from the bedroom. Sam laid down his fork and looked at Kitty nervously, "Sounds like Sammy's done woke up," he muttered.

Kitty nodded calmly and went on with her breakfast.

SAM took a drink of coffee and fidgeted. The walls became louder as their son expressed his displeasure at being left alone to the full extent of his lung power.

"Sounds like he's took bad tuh me," Sam said hopefully. He pushed back his chair as though to get up. "Mebby I better go in an' see to the little tyke."

"Go on and eat your breakfast," said Kitty firmly. "You mustn't humor him that way."

"But he might have a pin stickin' him or somethin'," Sam argued weakly.

"Nonsense. You just want an excuse to go in and take him up. You'd spoil him dreadfully if I'd let you, Sam."

"Tain't spoilin' tuh see what's wrong," he protested indignantly. But he steeled his ears against the baby's cries and hunched forward over his food again.

Kitty got up lightly. She stopped to stroke his cheek lovingly as she went past him into the other room. "I know you won't be happy until he comes to the table with us."

The wailing stopped as soon as Kitty bent over the crib and picked the baby up. She carefully wrapped him in a soft blue robe that was a gift from Pat and Sally Stevens, and brought him into the kitchen.

She stopped in the doorway and turned her head to listen to the sound of a horse trotting down the road from Dutch Springs.

Sam got up and turned back a fold of the robe to peer fondly down at the baby, and Kitty said, "Sounds like we've got company coming."

Sam said, "He gets more like you, purtier every day. Yep. Somebody is stoppin'."

He went past Kitty to the front door and frowned when he saw a stranger dismounting outside. He was a heavily built, middle-aged man, wearing city clothes. He rode a good horse and swung out of the saddle and ground-tied him with an easy manner that showed he was an accomplished horseman no matter what sort of clothes he wore, and he advanced toward Sam with a pleasant smile that showed two gold teeth in front.

He said, "You must be Sam Sloan." Sam nodded and said, "Howdy." He held out his hand and it was taken in a strong grip.

"I'm Jim Stranch," the stranger ex-

plained. He spoke the name as though he expected Sam to recognize it, then added after a slight pause, "Western manager of the Pony Express system."

"Come on in, Mr. Stranch," Sam said quickly. "Nothin' wrong 'bout tuh way I bin ridin' my route, is there?"

"On the contrary," Stranch assured him. He stepped inside out of the bright sunlight and looked with polite inquiry at Kitty who came forward with the baby cuddled to her breast.

"This here's my wife," Sam mumbled. "It's Mr. Stranch, Kitty. One of my bosses, I reckon."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Sloan," Stranch said formally. "It looks as though you folks are situated mighty comfortably here."

SOMETHING in his voice warned Kitty that this man from the city represented a menace to the peace and security of their home. She said quietly, "We are happy here. I hope . . . you're not going to fire Sam."

"On the contrary," Stranch's booming laugh reassured her for a moment. "We consider Sam Sloan one of our most valuable men. I went over your record in the Denver office," he went on to Sam, "and I want to congratulate you on an outstanding job of riding your leg of the Pony Express." He had blue eyes that seemed to look through a man while he talked to him.

"Tain't bin no trouble," Sam muttered modestly, though pleased by his praise from an official of the company.

"That's where you're wrong," Stranch told him warmly. "You're the only rider in this division with a perfect record. Never late and no trouble on your leg of the route. You should be proud of your husband, Mrs. Sloan."

"I am," Kitty lifted her head and her eyes challenged the Pony Express executive. "Does he get a raise in salary for doing his job so well?"

"Better than that," chuckled Stranch. "I've come to offer him an

important job. With a higher salary and a lot more responsibility."

"Wait a minute," Sam protested. "If it's somethin' that'll take me away from home, the answer is no."

"Don't be too hasty," Stranch expostulated. "You haven't heard my proposition yet."

"You haven't finished your breakfast, Sam," Kitty reminded him. "And perhaps Mr. Stranch would like a cup of coffee."

"I certainly would," he told her heartily. "I always say there's nothing like a cup of coffee to help along a business discussion."

"Shore," said Sam, turning toward the kitchen. "Yo're welcome tuh set an' drink a cup of cawfee, but Kitty an' me ain't gonna like the kinda bizness you wanta talk about."

CHAPTER II

SEATED at the pleasant kitchen table with morning sunlight vividly touching the centerpiece of blue flowers, Jim Stranch exhaled a deep sigh of satisfaction and nodded knowingly at Sam Sloan.

"It's wonderful the way a woman can make an out-of-the-way place like this comfortable and homelike. I'd say you are a very lucky man, Mr. Sloan."

"Don't think I don't know it," Sam glanced appreciatively at Kitty who sat in a low rocker near the window giving young Sammy his bottle. "Thass why I ain't int'rested in no proposition that'd break things up."

"And that's exactly why I've come to you," Stranch told him briskly. "You're the only rider in this division with a wife and family, Sloan. The job I have in mind needs a family man. One who is steady and dependable and can be trusted with responsibility. One who won't fly off the handle and go out looking for trouble, but will be cautious and avoid danger as much as possible."

Sam frowned incredulously and shot a quick glance at Kitty, unable to realize that the Pony Express executive was talking about him. Kitty smiled quietly and pretended she didn't see Sam's glance. Sam's first impulse was to angrily deny that he

was the kind of man Stranch had just described. He wondered if the city man hadn't ever heard about any of the exploits of Pat Stevens and Ezra and him. Just because he was married and had a baby didn't mean he'd lost his quick temper or his habit of walking into trouble with blazing guns. Why, doggone it, the reason there hadn't never been no trouble on his leg of the route was that his reputation had scared any holdup men away.

But Stranch certainly seemed unaware of any of that. He went on affably, "This Pony Express system is trying to lead the way in the West in bringing in a new era of law and order. The old theory of shooting first and asking questions afterward is definitely on its way out. Now that I've seen you here in the peace and security of your own home, I'm more than ever convinced you're the man I'm looking for to go up north of Denver and help to inaugurate a new route into Wyoming."

Sam opened his mouth to blurt out an angry denial.

But Kitty spoke before Sam had a chance to put the visitor right. She looked over to them with a proud smile and nodded her curly, blond head emphatically. She said, "I think that's wonderful, Sam. You don't know how it pleases me to hear Mr. Stranch say those things."

Sam swallowed hard and closed his mouth. He hung his head and mumbled, "Thass mighty fine of you to say them things."

"Here's the situation in a nutshell," said Stranch briskly. "We've been planning for some time to extend our mail service northward and westward from Denver. Various routes have been under consideration. As you know, the town of Cheyenne, Wyoming, lies due north of Denver, while Laramie is west of Cheyenne." With a blunt fingertip he traced the outline of a map on the white tablecloth.

"The most direct and logical route into the northwest is through Laramie, by-passing Cheyenne. However, certain business interests have pressed for a route through Cheyenne and then west to Laramie, going around two sides of a triangle, as you

can see. These interests have invested heavily in town-sites around Cheyenne, expecting the town to grow and become a business center if the Pony Express route goes that way. They stand to lose their investment if Cheyenne is by-passed. . . and that is what my company has decided to do."

SAM was listening with interest. He nodded his head slowly. "An' they don't like that, I reckon."

Stranch smiled thinly. "Emphatically not. They've put all sorts of pressure on the board of directors, but to no avail. The most direct route is through Laramie, and that's where it's going."

"Sorta tough on them Cheyenne fellers," Sam muttered.

"Exactly." Jim Stranch nodded vigorous approval of Sam Sloan's immediate and intelligent understanding of the situation. "The citizens of Cheyenne are aroused and have made various threats against the company. There are some who openly declare we'll never be successful in putting the route directly through Laramie. They prophesy all sorts of disaster, even going so far as to threaten bodily violence to our employees. You can see why we need a man up there with tact and dependability. One who is slow to anger and who will meet threats of violence with stubborn determination. In short, such a man as I believe you to be, Mr. Sloan."

Sam didn't look at his wife this time. He was afraid he'd bust right out laughing in Stranch's face if he did. Instead, he said:

"Looks tuh me like a funny way tuh do bizness. I'd think you'd want a tough two-gun hombre tuh put the line through. Somebody like, well, mebbly Pat Stevens here in Powder Valley. I reckon you've heard about Pat?"

"I know of Pat Stevens by reputation," Stranch admitted, "and he's exactly the sort of man we don't want. We don't wish to arouse antagonism, Sloan. We need the good will of every faction. We don't want a man who will fight back, but one

who will go ahead in a businesslike manner and see the route through."

"So you picked on me?" muttered Sam angrily. He started to shake his head, but caught a glimpse of Kitty and didn't. Her face was glowing with pride.

"Exactly," said Jim Stranch. "We need a man who knows the details of riding the Pony Express, and we like to reward our men for good work on their past record. Frankly, I made this trip down from Denver because I wanted to observe you in your own home before I made the final decision to offer you the position as Assistant Division Superintendent for the route north of Denver. And I want to tell you I'm mighty pleased with what I've observed here. Any man with a fine wife and a beautiful baby like yours will go mighty slow about mixing into trouble he can possibly avoid."

"Then," said Sam in a troubled voice, "yo're offerin' me tuh job?"

"Exactly. If you can arrange to catch the night train out of Hopewell Junction you can be on the job day after tomorrow."

"That's mighty sudden," mused Sam. "Who'll take over my leg tuh Dutch Springs?"

"I'll arrange for a relief rider as soon as I get back to Dutch Springs?"

"Well, I shore dunno." Sam looked at Kitty helplessly. "How 'bout it, honey? What do you think?"

"I think you should accept," Kitty told him calmly. "It's been wonderful living here with no worries, but I don't want to hold you back from going on in the world."

"Now that's a wonderful wife for you," Stranch approved heartily. "She's a real helpmate, Sloan."

"What'll you do?" Sam asked her helplessly. "Lef' all alone here with Sammy. I shore don't like the idee. . . ."

"Nonsense," said Kitty vigorously. "I won't have to stay here indefinitely. I could go to visit Pat and Sally for a time until you make some arrangements for me up there. Ezra will help me pack up and get moved."

OF COURSE you'll want your wife to join you," boomed

Stranch. "I'm counting on the steady influence of a woman to help keep things in line on that new route. Your new superior is a married man also. A rancher by the name of Henry Hughes on a small ranch north of Denver."

"My new . . . superior?" Sam repeated with a puzzled frown.

"Your new boss," Stranch explained. "The man we've selected as Division Superintendent. A fine man with five beautiful daughters. With you and Mr. Hughes working together closely, I'm sure the project will be in safe hands."

"Five little gals?" Sam echoed dismally.

"He sounds like a wonderful man to work for," Kitty put in enthusiastically. "Oh, I just know you and Mr. Hughes will run the line so there won't be any trouble, Sam."

"That's jest what I'm afereed of," he muttered.

Stranch luckily didn't hear him. He emptied his coffee cup and got up. "This is a load off my mind," he declared. "I'll meet you at Hopewell Junction tonight in time to catch the night train, Sloan. And I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed meeting you, Mrs. Sloan," he went on warmly to Kitty. "The influence of a good woman means a great deal these days."

Kitty thanked him with twinkling eyes. She carried the baby in to its crib while Sam went to the door to see their guest off.

Kitty ran forward and flung her arms about his neck, laughing helplessly at the disgusted look on Sam's face when he came back inside.

"It's wonderful," she gurgled. "I could hardly keep a straight face while he was talking, Sam. Picking you out for that job because they want a man who'll run from trouble. Oh Sam darling, it's the funniest thing that ever happened."

There was a baffled expression on Sam Sloan's dark face. "It does beat all," he muttered. "But how're they gonna feel when they find out how I really am? Fust gun-fight, I'll get fired shore."

Kitty drew back from him and sobered instantly. "There aren't going

to be any gun-fights, Sam. Don't you see? You'll have to live up to your new reputation. No one up there knows you."

"Mebby it'll work," Sam agreed darkly, "if I don't get pushed too fur. But I ain't promisin' nothin', Kitty. I ain't never learned tuh run away from trouble."

CHAPTER III

NORTHWEST of Denver, Colorado, the road to Laramie follows a winding course around the base of the foothills of the Rockies. The Hughes ranch lay on this road about twenty miles from Denver. The frame house was drab and weatherbeaten, and the corrals and outbuildings showed a similar state of neglect.

Henry Hughes was a gaunt man with prematurely stooped shoulders, as though he had carried too heavy a burden too long. His hands were calloused and work-worn, and his gaunt features were deeply etched with lines of weariness and defeat.

Tonight, the happy sound of lilting music poured out of the open windows of the Hughes' ranch house. Vera Hughes had been a music teacher in Kansas City before she married the young rancher and came to the foothills of the Rockies with him to homestead the small ranch. As each of her daughters grew old enough to handle a musical instrument, the mother had scrimped and saved and managed somehow to provide each of them with an instrument on which they were taught to play; and in one corner of the living room was Mrs. Hughes' most prized possession, the melodeon she had brought across the plains in a covered wagon on her honeymoon.

And tonight the children were playing as they hadn't played for years, while Henry and Vera Hughes sat very close together on the shabby sofa and secretly held hands and smiled happily at each other.

In addition to the dismal tones of the long cherished melodeon, there was a violin, viola, violoncello and bass viol, played by Miranda, Jennifer, Agatha, Samantha and Eunice

Hughes; stairstepped down from Miranda who was the oldest of the five sisters at the age of fourteen.

When the final strains of "Sweet and Low" wobbled out of the instruments, Henry Hughes smiled fondly at his five daughters and gave his wife's hand an extra hard squeeze.

"Mighty purty," he commended them proudly. "Jest mighty purty, seems like to me. They shore are improvin' Vera. Why, little Eunice han'les that thar melodeon 'most as good as the woman we saw in the church at Denver that time."

Vera Hughes nodded happily. Her leathery cheeks were tinged with a touch of happy color and her eyes glowed excitedly. "But the old melodeon does need fixing awfully bad. And some of their instruments are getting. . . ."

"I know, Vera." Henry cleared his throat apologetically. "Seems like there ain't never been no extra money handy for fixin' 'em up. But now it's different. His voice became strong and proud. "With this new job, I tell you things'll be different."

Miranda carefully laid her violin in its worn case and came to crouch down ecstatically on the bare floor at the knees of her parents. Her blue eyes were too large for her thin face framed by two thick braids of corn-silk hair and her cotton dress was so faded by innumerable washings that it had lost all trace of its original gay colors.

"Papa," she demanded with shining eyes, "is it sure enough truly true that we can go to Denver to buy us some new dresses?"

"Can we, Papa?" Jennifer hurried over and dropped down beside her sister. Jennifer was inclined to be stout, but the meager diet of the family for the past few years had kept her from getting too plump.

Henry Hughes grinned happily and put his calloused hand on Miranda's head.

"You shore can, daughters. Tomorrow mornin' early. That is, if that feller Sam Sloan gets here in time so's I can drive you in. The Denver office said he'd be up to see me tonight or early in thuh mornin' at thuh latest."

HENRY and his wife regarded the five little girls fondly as they reluctantly trooped off to bed, then Henry settled himself back on the sofa and slowly loaded his pipe.

Vera sat down in the broken-backed rocker near him and picked up her mending. She sighed happily and said, "The job is certainly a Godsend, isn't it? I've never seen the children so excited."

"I've bin a mighty pore father to 'em," Henry reproached himself. "But now I'll make it up to them, and to you too. I swear I will."

"You haven't, Henry. Don't ever say that. You're a wonderful father." Vera wiped away a tear and looked at him indignantly. "But it will be nice to have a little money again to buy things with."

"It shore will." Henry Hughes cleared his throat. "I shore hope that Sloan feller gets here tuhnight."

"But you'll be in charge, won't you, Henry?"

"That's right. Sam Sloan'll be what they call my 'sistant. I'm gonna be Deevision Sup'rintendent like I tol' you." Henry Hughes pronounced the title solemnly. He had been secretly repeating it to himself for days and hadn't got over the thrill of hearing the words spoken out loud.

"You've made some of the arrangements already, haven't you?" Vera's needle was busy taking up the hem of a dress for Miranda to wear into the city and she spoke absently.

"I've did a lot awready." Mr. Hughes couldn't keep a note of pride out of his voice. "Got a bunch of fast hawses lined up that I got tuh see to in Denver, an' I'm llin' out where the relay stations will be at. An' I got to see Hank an' Wack 'bout ridin' the route from here to Daniel's Gulch. They're a pair of tough hombres that had ought to be able tuh take keer of any trouble that might pop up."

Mrs. Hughes put down her sewing in alarm. "You don't expect trouble, do you?"

"I reckon not," Henry told her stolidly. "Them Cheyenne fellers will get over their mad when they see the

route's goin' to Laramie, whether they like it or not."

"Do you think they'll use force to prevent the mail from being ridden?"

"I reckon not." Henry's voice remained mild and unconcerned. He arose and straightened his stooped shoulders, yawning widely. "Reckon I'll step out an' take a last look tuh see if I hear Sam Sloan comin' tuh-night. Then I'll be ready to turn in."

HE WENT out the door into the silent night, and she sat with her mending in her lap.

She heard the sound of a galloping horse pounding toward the little ranch house, and at first she thought that would be Sam Sloan coming in from Denver. Then she realized the rider was coming from the north, and at a breakneck speed that indicated more than ordinary haste.

She listened curiously, and when the hoofbeats came to a sudden stop, she heard her heart pounding madly in her breast. She leaned forward and strained her ears to hear Henry's hail of greeting, but there was only heavy silence from the night outside.

Then there was a curious, half-stifled cry that sounded like nothing Vera Hughes had ever heard before. It was followed by a dull thud and a sound of thrashing about as though two men were wrestling together on the ground.

She jumped up and spilled her mending on the floor. The horse began to pound away in the same mad gallop that had brought it to the ranch, and above the driving hoofbeats Vera heard three loud, distinctly spaced popping sounds from the darkness. They were sharp and clear, as though someone were firing a toy pistol, or like the cracking of a whiplash.

She ran to the door and stared out, and terror gripped her heart when she could see nothing, and could hear only the receding pound of galloping hooves.

She stepped out and started toward the corral, crying out in a troubled voice, "Henry! Is anything the matter, Henry?" though keeping her

voice low so the children wouldn't hear and be alarmed.

Her husband didn't answer her. It was as though the night had swallowed him up; as though the speeding rider had swooped him up in his arms and carried her husband away.

A terrible fright drove her on toward the corral. Her flying feet encountered a yielding object on the ground, and as she tripped she knew instinctively it was the body of her husband.

She gathered herself up and crept forward on her knees, crouched beside him, moaning softly.

Before she found he had no pulse, Vera knew that Henry Hughes was dead. Somehow, she had known it before she ran out of the house searching for him. It was another and final blow of the evil Fate that had been dogging them all their lives.

She fell forward across her husband's body in a dead faint.

CHAPTER IV

SAM SLOAN found them like that half an hour later when he rode up from Denver. He recognized the little ranch house by the description Stranch had given him, and as he reined up in front, he noted that the front door was standing wide open with lamplight streaming out from the living room.

He went to the door and knocked, and then peered in through the open door curiously, surprised and a little alarmed when no one came out immediately.

He knocked louder, wondering what the hell had happened at the isolated ranch house late at night to cause the inhabitants to all go away, leaving the door wide open and lights burning.

He was just about to step inside to look around for himself when he heard the cautious scuff of bare feet from a back room, and an instant later he saw the solemn face of Miranda shyly peering out at him from an inside doorway.

Her hair was unbraided and hung down loosely about her face, and she wore a nightgown made out of flour

sacks from which most of the red printing had been washed out. Her eyes were big and round, and they grew bigger and rounder as she stared at Sam Sloan's dark, ugly face, his rough, travel-stained clothes and the big gun at his hip.

She moistened her lips and gasped out imploringly, "Where's Papa and Mama? What have you done to them? Are you a bad man?"

"I'm Sam Sloan. Yore Paw's expectin' me, I reckon. What d'yuh mean, askin' what I've done to 'em? I jest rode up from Denver. Where are they? What's bin goin' on here?"

"I don't know." Two big tears welled out of Miranda's eyes and ran down her thin cheeks. "We all went to bed and Mama and Papa went out in the yard. And we heard a horse come up and then go away fast, and I called and called but nobody answered. And I stayed back with the others so's they wouldn't be too scared. You look pretty tough to me," she added dubiously.

Sam said, "I can't help my looks, little gal, but you got no cause tuh be skeered of me. Run on back tuh bed an' I'll hunt yore Paw an' Ma. Most likely they had some trouble down to the corral with the stock."

He turned and strode away toward the corral, and that was how he came upon Mrs. Vera Hughes lying in a faint across the corpse of her husband.

Sam thought they were both dead when he saw them like that in the dim moonlight. He dropped to his knees with a startled grunt and struck a match, shielding the tiny flame between his two palms.

Henry Hughes lay on his back staring up at Sam Sloan. His eyes bulged from their sockets with a glassy look, and his gaunt face was contorted in a horrible grimace. There were red marks about his neck that seemed burned into the dead flesh as though a rope had been twisted about it violently; and from the curious position in which he lay, Sam saw at once that his neck was cleanly broken.

The match flickered out and Sam didn't bother to strike another one.

He gave a grunt of satisfaction as he caught hold of Vera's forearm and found the flesh still warm and a strong pulse beating.

He gently lifted her up from her husband's body and carried her into the house, feeling her stir in his arms and begin to revive as soon as the light struck her eyes.

He laid her down on the old sofa, and she struggled up to a sitting position instantly, looking up at him with horrified eyes while a strangled cry of terror trembled in her throat.

SAM shook his head and placed his finger over his lips warningly. He leaned over her and whispered, "I don't reckon the little gals know about this."

Miranda's voice came from the doorway behind them just then. "Mama! Are you all right? Where's Papa? Is that a bad man?"

"I'm Sam Sloan," Sam muttered. "I jest rode in from Denver."

Mrs. Hughes controlled her trembling lips long enough to tell her eldest daughter, "I'm all right, Miranda. Your father is out at the corral. Go back to bed and all of you go to sleep."

Miranda said obediently, "All right, Mama," and scampered back to the bedroom.

Mrs. Hughes covered her face with her hands and began to weep silently as full memory came back to her. "Is Henry . . . ? He's . . . he's . . ."

Sam said in a low voice, "Yore husband's dead, Ma'am." He went across the room and quietly closed the door leading into the children's bedroom. He pulled a chair up close in front of the widow and sat down. "You better tell me what happened." He pulled out a clean bandanna and awkwardly offered it to her.

Vera took it and wiped her eyes. She blew her nose and then looked at Sam Sloan hopelessly. "I knew it was too good to be true," she told him sadly. "I've felt it in my bones ever since Mr. Stranch offered Henry the job. You see, it meant everything to us, Mr. Sloan. I knew something would happen. Something always

does. Every time it seems like Henry is about to get ahead a little."

"Tell me what did happen," muttered Sam. "What kinda accident . . . ?"

"It waan't any accident," she told him fiercely. "It was murder. Some horrible kind of murder. I don't know how nor who. Someone who rode up in the night and struck without warning and rode away to the north again." She shuddered violently and then told him exactly what had happened.

"It was all so sudden," she ended. "He had no chance to defend himself. There was just that one cry and then a dull thud and then a sound as though a body was thrashing around on the ground. And then those three terrible pops as the murderer galloped away. And Henry was dead when I reached him."

Sam nodded soberly. "His neck is broke. There's what looks like rope burns around his neck. Jest guessin', I'd say the killer dropped a noose over his head an' hit the other end of the rope hard with it looped around his saddle-horn. Them three pops you heard, I shore dunno." He shook his head sadly. "You know anybody had it in for yore husband?"

"Had it in for Henry?" She looked at him in surprise and shook her head. "No one. Everyone liked him a lot. He didn't have an enemy in the world, Mr. Sloan. He was a thoroughly good man."

"Somebody had a reason tuh murder him," Sam told her grimly. "I'd shore admire tuh know who 'twas so's I could settle with him personal."

VERA HUGHES looked at him again as though she was really seeing her husband's assistant for the first time. Her gaze lingered long on the worn butt of his .45 carried in a businesslike open holster low on his hip, and she demanded suddenly:

"How do I know you're who you say? You don't look like the man Mr. Stranch said he had picked out to help Henry. He said Sam Sloan was a settled, married man with a new baby, the kind who would avoid trouble and gunplay. You look like a

gunman to me." Her voice rose shrilly. "How do I know you weren't here half an hour ago? Were you hired by the people in Cheyenne to murder poor Henry to discourage the route from going through Laramie?"

Sam reached in his pocket and pulled out an unsealed envelope. "Here's a letter from the Denver office to yore husband tellin' who I am. You better read it, then mebbey we kin go on talkin'."

Vera Hughes took the letter in trembling fingers. She opened it and read the few lines introducing Henry Hughes' new assistant to him. She refolded it and said dully, "I'm sorry. I guess you are Sam Sloan all right. I hope you're not angry at me for being suspicious."

Sam shook his head. "I wouldn't think much of you if you wasn't, Ma'am. You said somethin' a minute ago about me mebbey bein' hired by somebody from Cheyenne to kill Mr. Hughes to stop the route from goin' this way. Has he had any threats like that?"

"Nothing definite." She shook her head wearily. "There have been hints that there might be trouble putting the route through. It was the only reason I could think of. I *know* he hasn't any personal enemies who'd do a thing like that."

Sam moved uneasily in his chair. He got out the makings and glanced at Mrs. Hughes to see if she objected. She shook her head with a wan smile and said, "Go ahead and roll your cigarettes. I know most men think best while they're smoking."

When his cigarette was rolled and lit, Sam said diffidently, "What'll we do 'bout *him*? You want I should go out an' fetch him inside?"

"No! Oh, I don't know. What can I tell the children, Mr. Sloan? They worshiped their father. And they were all so happy tonight for the first time in years. They've gone to bed all full of happy dreams about a trip to Denver tomorrow to buy some things from Henry's first salary check. How can I tell them the truth?"

"Mebby we better not. Not fer a

little while, anyhow." Sam was puffing on his cigarette furiously while he thought about the pinched and frightened face of the little girl that had peered out at him when he first arrived. He didn't think he could stand looking at five little faces like that while he told them their father was dead. "They don't know nothin' 'bout it yet, huh?"

"No. I'm sure they don't. I think the others are all asleep except Miranda . . . she's the oldest . . . and you heard what I told her a minute ago."

Sam nodded. He asked thoughtfully, "What sorta funeral you figger on to have? A preacher an' all thuh trimmin's?"

Mrs. Hughes compressed her thin lips and shook her head. "We can't afford anything like that. And I don't think Henry would care anything about having a preacher. We always have had our own hymns and prayers here at home of a Sunday evening, and I don't see why we need outside preaching now."

"In that case," suggested Sam diffidently, "I reckon I kin fix things up if you want me to. You know. Bury 'im tuhnight while the little gals are still asleep."

"What will I tell them in the morning?" Mrs. Hughes began sobbing afresh. "They're looking forward so to a trip to Denver to buy new dresses and things. It'll break their hearts when I tell them . . . when I tell them . . ."

"No need tuh tell 'em right now," said Sam hastily. "Looky here. I kin fix everythin' up an' then ride on before they ever wake up. You kin tell 'em I come by an' got Mr. Hughes an' we had tuh ride to Laramie on Pony Express bizniss. Then you kin break thuh news to 'em gentle later on."

"But they'll wonder about the trip to Denver and be so disappointed," she sighed. "Seems like I can't bear to disappoint them now they've got their hopes up so, any more than I can bear to tell them about Henry."

"Take 'em on in to Denver," said Sam strongly. "Tell 'em their daddy

wanted 'em to go shoppin' anyhow, even if he was took away on bizniss."

MRS. HUGHES shook her head sadly. "There won't be any money for that now. You don't realize what a terribly hard time we've had, Mr. Sloan, just to keep seven mouths fed. Though, the good Lord knows, Henry did try his best."

"There'll be his first month's pay," Sam argued stubbornly. "An' I'm right shore there'll be more'n that too, a little later mebby."

An idea was beginning to form in his mind. He wasn't broke, by golly. He still had money in the Dutch Springs bank left from Ezra and his sale of the ES Ranch some years previously. He had even added some to it during the past year while he had been regularly employed as a Pony Express rider. He knew right well how Kitty'd feel if he put it up to her straight.

"What do you mean by that?" Mrs. Hughes asked hopefully. "What makes you think there'll be more money than his first check coming to him?"

"Insurance an' stuff like that," Sam told her vaguely. "When a man gets killed workin' for a company like the Pony Express, they allus see that his family is took care of. I'll see to it nex' time I'm in the Denver office."

"Oh, if you will, Mr. Sloan! You're so kind." Tears filled Vera Hughes' eyes. "But I won't go shopping or anything until I know for sure. We don't want charity. Henry would turn over in his grave if I ever took any money that wasn't really coming to him."

"Yes'm," Sam muttered. "I reckon I know how you feel." He got up and started for the door. "If you'll tell me where there's a shovel . . . an' where you'd like best, you know . . ."

"There's a shovel right outside the door." Vera got up and went with him. "And I think . . . out there under the cottonwoods. Henry loved those trees. We planted them when we first homesteaded here, and we used to sit under them together in the evenings when the sun sank behind the mountains in the west . . ."

Her voice trailed off into a choked sob as those memories surged through her mind.

Sam said, "Yes'm," and picked up the shovel and hurried away. It sure got him when he saw a woman cryin'. Times like this he found out he wasn't as tough as he pretended to be.

THERE was a clump of five cottonwoods on the bank of a little creek behind the house. He selected a smooth spot in the center where spreading branches would shade the grave of Henry Hughes from the blistering sun, and began to dig there.

He worked swiftly, and the ground was soft and yielding. When he had a good deep hole dug, deep enough so it would never be desecrated by coyotes or wolves, Sam laid down his shovel and went toward the corral to fetch Hughes' body.

He hoisted it on his shoulder with little difficulty, and as he strode back with his burden he heard the sweet and melancholy strains of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," drifting softly out of the open windows of the house from the old melodeon.

A lone coyote lifted its wailing voice from a nearby ridge as Sam paused on the brink of the grave, and the dirge of the wild mingled with the sacred music in a sad requiem for the murdered man while Sam Sloan gently lowered him to his final resting place beneath the earth.

It was an eerie experience, and one that Sam would never in his life forget. Furiously he shoveled dirt back into the grave and shaped it up in a neat mound on top, piling heavy stones on that until some more suitable grave marker could be placed there. It all seemed mighty tough on the widow and the girls, Sam reflected. But he'd do his best to help them.

When he returned to the house, the melodeon was silent again and Mrs. Hughes had a fire going in the kitchen range with a coffee-pot beginning to boil.

Her face, although still showing the lines of grief and care, had regained some of its wonted serenity.

CHAPTER V

and she was able to speak steadily again. "I thought you'd like a cup of hot coffee after your long ride, and then I suppose you'll want to go over Henry's plans for the route. He had things pretty well lined up, you know."

"That's mighty kind of you, Ma'am. I reckon I'll have tuh take over for thuh time bein', anyhow, though most likely the Denver office will 'point another man later for my boss in place of Mr. Hughes." Sam sat down gratefully at the bare kitchen table in front of a tin cup of steaming coffee. "Do you know much about his plans for thuh route?"

"Not a great deal," Mrs. Hughes confessed. "He has some papers in his desk. I know he had made arrangements to buy a whole bunch of fast horses in Denver from some commission house, and he's been working on a map marking out where the stations would be located."

She went out of the kitchen and returned with a map and various documents which she placed before Sam.

"And I know one of the first things he was going to see about was hiring Hank Slater and Wack Beadle for two of his riders. They live right up the road a piece, and Henry thought they'd be good men."

Sam nodded gravely. He rifled through the papers and made a pretense of studying the map, marked with X's where Henry Hughes had planned to establish way-stations. He didn't know much about business affairs, and he was suddenly appalled by having this heavy responsibility thrust upon him.

Mrs. Hughes hesitated in the doorway, saying, "I think I'd better go back to bed with the children now. Stay as long as you like, Mr. Sloan, and just push the door shut when you go. And I'll never get over being thankful to you for what you've done tonight."

While Sam was trying to think up the right words to say to the widow, she slipped away silently and he heard the bedroom door open and close softly. He took another big swig of hot coffee and then began studying the map again.

SAM SLOAN woke up with a start, realizing that his muscles were cramped and he was cold, but not realizing much else. He stared around the strange kitchen in consternation for a minute, then remembered where he was. He'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table in the Hughes' ranch house.

The map was still spread out in front of him and dregs of cold coffee were burning in his cup. The lamp still burned steadily on the table, though it was already well past daylight.

He remembered it all now. Mrs. Hughes had gone to bed and he had closed his eyes for just a little snooze. He cocked his head toward the door and listened guiltily for some sound from the sleeping widow or children, and he breathed in a deep sigh of relief when he heard nothing. Maybe it still wasn't too late for him to slip away before the kids woke up and give the mother the chance to tell them that their father had ridden away with him the preceding night.

He leaned forward and blew out the lamp, then carefully pushed back his chair and stood up. He hesitated, looking down at his boots with the big spurs buckled on them, then stood on one foot and then the other while he slipped them off. He gathered up the map and papers and tiptoed out to the front door.

When it was safely closed behind him, he sat down and pulled on his boots, went to the horse he had left ground-tied in the yard last night when he arrived.

He had forgotten about leaving his horse saddled all night. He was stricken with remorse, and he rubbed the soft nose gently and patted his neck while he whispered apologies into his ear. The horse seemed to understand and accept Sam's explanation, for he tossed his head as though to say, "That's all right for this time. Just see that you don't let it happen again."

Sam swung into the saddle and reined him away from the ranch into the road leading northward. Mrs. Hughes had said that Hank Slater

and Wack Beadle lived up this road a ways, and Sam thought he'd better see them while he was so close before he went back from Denver to report Hughes' death.

The first rays of the morning sun were striking the clump of cottonwoods behind the house as Sam rode away. They touched the mound of fresh earth beneath the trees with red fingers, and Sam turned his eyes away hastily after one look. Didn't do any good thinking about things like that. He was sure glad he'd waked up in time to get away before the five little girls surrounded him with questioning eyes.

Half an hour at an easy trot brought Sam to a little log shack built up against a rocky cliff about a hundred yards off the road. Smoke plumed up from a crooked stovepipe and there was a horse tied out in front, so Sam reined over with the intention of stopping and getting directions for finding the two men he wanted to see.

His eyes narrowed with perplexity as he neared the shack and got a better look at the tied horse. He was saddled all right, but with the funniest little flat dingus Sam had ever seen on a horse's back. Looked more like one of Kitty's pancakes than anything else. But it was buckled on with a regular girth, and a couple of narrow leather straps hung down from the sides ending in small iron loops that might pass for stirrups if you had plenty of imagination.

The horse itself was a beautiful gray stallion with a long flowing mane and tail, sharp pointed ears and small-boned head. He held his head arched in an unnatural position, and pranced nervously when Sam rode up.

ONE LOOK told Sam why he held his head in that position. He was fixed up with a contraption called a martingale, a leather strap running from the girth between his front legs and fastened tightly to the curb bit. It was a cruel device that Sam had heard of but had never actually seen before. It made his western blood boil to see a fine horse fixed up that way, and his eyes glowed with anger as he swung out of the saddle.

He stepped forward with the intention of unsnapping the harassing strap, but it was a solid piece of leather with no way to undo it without loosening the girth or taking off the bridle.

Sam's anger deepened when he found it was fixed that way. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a claspknife, opened a long blade and cut the strap in two with one slash.

The stallion tossed his head and softly nickered his relief and thanks. Sam heard the door of the log shack creak open behind him, and he slowly turned in that direction with the long-bladed knife still open in his hand.

The blast of a six-shooter greeted him as he turned. A bullet whined over his head and Sam instinctively dropped, his hand going to his holstered gun.

He didn't draw the weapon. A tall, lean cowhand was walking toward him slowly, his own gun held hip-high and covering him. A harsh voice warned, "I won't shoot over yore head next time."

Sam withdrew his hand from his gun-butt. He got to his feet slowly and dusted himself off. The man came closer. He was staggering a little from too much drink, but his gun covered Sam steadily. His hard-lined face was set in a suspicious scowl, and his greenish eyes were a little too close together. They flickered over Sam before he stopped ten feet away to snarl, "Looks like I caught me uh hawse-thief."

Sam Sloan looked down at the open clasp-knife in his hand and then at the stallion's severed martingale. He shrugged and said, "I cut his head loose. I was comin' in to . . ."

"What's happenin' out there?" a coarse voice shouted from the open door. Another figure emerged and lurched down the path toward them. He was a head shorter than the first man, bareheaded, with black hair growing low on his forehead. He had a big, loose mouth and his clothes looked as though he had slept in them for weeks.

"Got me a hawse-thief," the first man said without turning his head.

"Fetch uh rope an' we'll fix him so he won't steal no more hawses."

"Do tell?" The shorter man sounded surprised and pleased. He was quite drunk. He wavered from side to side down the path, staggering past his companion to stare at Sam. "Stranger in these parts, huh?"

"I'm up from Powder Valley," Sam Sloan said disgustedly. "An' I ain't no hawse-thief."

"Caught yuh cuttin' that English feller's stud loose, didn't I?" the taller man demanded triumphantly.

"Effen he's from Powder Valley he's a hawse-thief," the loose-mouthed man declared with alcoholic seriousness. "Thass all they do down yonder. Steal from one another." He hiccupped gently and took two shambling steps forward. "Keep yore gun on 'im, Hank. Me, I'm gonna slap his ears back."

SAM'S eyes glittered hotly. They were both half-drunk, but that made his position more dangerous. No telling what they'd do.

He dropped his knife to the ground as he lunged sideways and forward. His shoulder hit the shorter man's belly like a battering ram and a gun exploded wildly near his ear. His charge sent the nearer man reeling back into the other one, and Sam walked in with flailing fists while they were still off balance.

The shorter man went down under a crushing right to the jaw, and Sam's left fist struck a paralyzing blow to Hank's forearm as he desperately attempted to level his gun.

It went spinning out of his hand to the ground and Sam laughed happily. He ducked under a swinging blow and planted both fists in Hank's belly. The tall man was stringy and hard, and the blows had no immediate effect. He pounded a chopping blow down on the back of Sam's neck and stepped sideways to drive a short right to the side of his jaw.

Sam shook his head and grunted angrily. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the shorter man dragging himself up to his knees. He reached for his gun, but before he could draw it Hank was on top of him like a wildcat. They went to the ground

together, and Hank was on top, shouting, "Drill him, Wack! Get ready when I turn him loose an' jump off . . .?"

His shouted words faded into a horrible gurgle as Sam got both hands around his sinewy neck. He groaned and thrashed around and tried to disengage himself, but Sam clung to him inexorably.

If Hank got loose from him, he knew Wack had recovered enough to use his gun. As long as they rolled about on the ground together wildly, Wack couldn't shoot for fear of hitting his partner.

It was the craziest thing that had ever happened, but Sam knew that death hovered over him just the same. Hearing both their names, he now realized the two punchers must be Hank Slater and Wack Beadle, the two men whom Henry Hughes had hired to help ride the new Pony Express route, two of his new employees actually, but there wasn't any time to introduce himself to them now.

Hank's struggles were getting weaker as they thrashed about on the ground. As they turned and twisted, Sam got momentary glimpses of Wack sitting up watching them with his gun poised eagerly for a chance to use it.

Sam fought desperately to keep Hank's body between him and the waiting gun, and as he choked the strength out of the lean man, he gauged his chances carefully, waiting until he finally dared disengage one hand from Hank's throat and reach down for the gun still miraculously in his holster.

The maneuver was hidden from Wack by Hank's body, and Sam was able to draw his gun before Wack realized what he was doing.

With one mighty heave, Sam cast Hank away from him, and in that split-second before Wack had time to fire he leveled his gun and triggered it.

It was one of the luckiest shots Sam had ever made. His bullet smashed against the barrel of Wack's gun and knocked it from his lax fingers. Wack looked down at his weapon stupidly while Sam sat up, draw-

ing great rasping breaths into his tortured lungs.

Hank was lying on his side, groaning and retching feebly while his fingers clawed at his throat.

Sam Sloan got to his feet and kicked Wack's gun to one side. He said coldly, "If you two vinegararpoons are sobered up enough to listen tuh sense I'll tell you some."

Wack shook his head and muttered defensively. "We ain't drunk. Not so very, nohow."

Hank drew himself up and cuddled his bony knees with long arms. His greenish eyes were venomous in their appraisal of Sam. He wet his lips and muttered thickly, "What yuh gonna do now?"

Sam Sloan shrugged and holstered his gun. He said, "I reckon you two rannies are Hank Slater and Wack Beadle, huh?"

They both nodded, and Wack asked in surprise, "How-come you know us?"

"Because I rode here lookin' for you. I'm Sam Sloan, from Powder Valley like I tol' you . . . where we ain't all hawse-thieves."

HANK SLATER'S hatchet face showed perplexity for a moment. His perplexity cleared and he grinned briefly though his thin features indicated it was a painful effort for him to do so.

"Sam Sloan," he muttered to Wack. "Hughes' new assistant. Hell, Wack! We've done jumped our new boss on the Pony Express."

Wack Beadle's loose mouth opened laxly. He blinked up at Sam with a curious mixture of bravado and fear on his face, and demanded, "How come you was stealin' hawses then?"

"I wasn't," said Sam in disgust. He gestured toward the stallion. "I was ridin' by an' saw him with his head held down by that leather strap. I cut it loose an' was goin' in to cuss out the man that'd do that to a hawse when yore quick-gunned pardner come out a-shootin' without givin' me no chance to explain."

"Sorry," Hank muttered. "We'd bin drinkin' some an' when I saw you cuttin' him loose I thought you was cuttin' the bridle reins." He

got to his feet painfully and looked around for his gun.

Wack Beadle got up also and thrust out his hand. "No hard feelin's, huh?"

Sam took his hand. "Suits me," he muttered. "But I'm tellin' you right now one of you ain't ridin' no Pony Express for me. Which one of you put that kind of outfit on a hawse?" He nodded toward the stallion with his postage stamp saddle.

They both laughed shortly. "Ain't none of our doin's," Wack disclaimed. "That hawse belongs to a funny feller in thuh house sleepin' off a jag. English feller that rode up las' night after he'd got lost. We got tuh drinkin' some an' hadn't Hank or me looked out tuh see what he was ridin' till you come up."

"No need fer you tuh get so horn-toady 'bout it nohow," Hank put in angrily. "Henry Hughes hired us an' it'll take Hughes tuh fire us."

"I'm takin' over Hughes' job for thuh time bein'," Sam said quietly.

"How-come?"

"Hughes is dead."

They both stared at him. "We seen him yestidy," Wack muttered. "Happened last night."

"Seems like he took sick mighty sudden," Hank growled incredulously.

"Rope-poisonin'," Sam explained curtly. "His wife found him layin' in the yard with his neck broke. There's burns on his neck that looks like they come from a braided rawhide riata. You seen anybody ride up that way an' back las' night?"

They both shook their heads. They appeared dumfounded by his news. "Who'd do a thing like that?" muttered Hank. "Him with all them young-uns, an' friendly as a spotted pup too."

"Know any enemies he had hereabouts?" Sam asked.

They both shook their heads again. "Henry Hughes didn't have no enemies," Hank stated positively.

"Betcha it was on account of thuh Pony Express route tuh Laramie," Wack put in eagerly. "Some of them Cheyenne fellers that're sore. There's bin warnings that there'd be trouble if we tried to put her through."

"What kinda warnin's?"

Wack shrugged. "I don't know rightly. I reckon Hughes sorta looked for trouble."

"That's right," Hank put in. "I reckon that's why he hired Wack an' me tuh ride for him. 'Cause we pack guns an' ain't afraid tuh sling lead."

"Know anybody in these parts that packs a rawhide rope?" Sam asked.

"I shore don't," Hank frowned wonderingly. "Mexicans mostly favor them riatas, an' we ain't got any Mex in these parts."

"Why don't we go in an' wet our whistles?" Wack suggested. "There's still part of a jug left."

"Shore," Hank agreed jovially, "we had orta give our new boss a drink, I reckon, after tryin' tuh string him up for hawse-stealin'," he added with a half-apologetic grin and a humorous glint in his greenish eyes.

"Don't mind if I do," Sam agreed, moving toward the log shack with them. "Fightin' two of you this early in the mornin' is a mighty thirsty business."

HANK opened the door for Sam to go inside. A thick, stale stench of tobacco smoke and whisky fumes hit him in the face as he entered the small dim room. He stood just inside the doorway and blinked for a moment before his eyes became adjusted to the dimness of the interior.

Then he saw a rough pine table in the center of the room, holding an earthenware jug and three glasses. One chair stood by the table and another was overturned in one corner. The floor was dirty, and littered with cigarette butts and match sticks. A man was sleeping on a pallet by the fireplace. His mouth was open and he was breathing loudly. He had a long, horsy face, with thick black eyebrows that met across the bridge of his arched nose. He wore a rumpled suit of rough gray tweed, with a white shirt and a black bow tie.

Hank and Wack came in behind Sam, and Hank nodded toward the sleeping figure. "Meet Lord Harry

Whoozis from London. I reckon he ain't used tuh drinkin' straight whisky 'cause he passed out after six glasses."

"What in hell's he doin' in Colorado?" Sam marveled. "It's a long jump from London."

"Says he's got a huntin' place over toward Cheyenne. He talks funny an' he don't know much, but I reckon he's harmless." Hank turned his back disdainfully on their sleeping guest and stooped to pick up a dirty glass from the floor. He tilted the jug across his forearm and poured the three glasses more than half full of whisky, passing one to Sam and pushing another toward Wack before taking his own.

He lifted his own glass and asked anxiously, "With Hughes dead, d'yuh still reckon you'll wanta use Wack an' me ridin' the route?"

"I dunno why not," Sam growled. "Looks tuh me like gun-hands is what we're gonna need to put the mail through to Laramie."

All of them drank. Hank emptied his glass and smacked his lips. "I sorta wondered," he admitted. "I reckon we got tuh wrong idee of you from what Hughes an' Jim Stranch said. We never figgered Sam Sloan would be a gun-totin' waddle with as much fight as a ringy coyote. They said you was a home-lovin' hombra that knowed more about changin' diapers than throwin' lead."

Sam emptied his glass and grinned. "I can change diapers too." His voice challenged them.

"Ain't no reason why yuh shouldn't," Wack put in placatingly. "I reckon we'll be proud tuh ride fer you, huh, Hank?"

Hank said, "Shore thing." Then his lean face clouded over. "If Mr. Stranch don't back out, now that Hughes is dead."

Sam asked, "Do you know Stranch?"

"We met him," Wack mumbled. "I don't reckon he cottoned none too much to Hank an' me ridin' the mail for him. Said we'd have tuh leave our guns to home when he started on account of he didn't want no trouble."

"You'll be ridin' for me," Sam reminded them sharply. "An' you'll

keep yore guns on till we get the route tuh Laramie started."

THE MAN by the fireplace snorted loudly and sat up. The trio all turned to look at him gravely. His eyes were bloodshot and he opened and shut his mouth and swallowed several times before asking weakly, "Where am I?"

"Right here where yuh passed out last night," Hank assured him. "This here's Sam Sloan, our new Pony Express boss what's takin' over the Laramie route since Henry Hughes got killed last night."

"Delighted," the Englishman murmured. He put both hands over his face and went on fretfully, "What was in that stuff you chaps gave me to drink last night?"

"That wasn't nothin' but Rocky Mountain fire juice," Hank told him with a delighted wink back at the others. "We fix it up tuh taste good with a mite of panther blood an' a dash of gunpowder. Then we catch us a rattlesnake an' milk the pizen out of him an' . . ."

"Please!" the Englishman begged, groaning and shaking his head from side to side. "I'm certain it's very humorous, but I'm in no mood for humor this morning, dontcha know. If you could do something about the little men who have set up a smithy inside my head I'd be most obliged to you."

Sam grinned at the others and told them, "I'll have to be riding into Denver to report Hughes' death to Stranch. Thanks for the drink . . . an' next time don't be so damned fast with yore shootin' iron when a stranger stops by to favor a hawse you've got tied outside. Next feller might not be good-natured." He nodded and went out.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon and Vera Hughes was feeding a pail of clabber to the chickens in a wire pen by the side of the house. She was alone at the ranch, and she had never felt so desperately lonely in all her life. Disappointing the children about their

trip to Denver that morning had been the hardest thing she had ever done.

But she was thankful for Sam Sloan and what he had done, because it made it possible to keep the terrible truth from them a little longer. Since Miranda had seen Sam at the house in the night, it wasn't difficult to make them believe that Henry Hughes had ridden away with his new assistant on business. She had explained to the children that the shopping trip to the city was just deferred, promising them they could go as soon as their father returned.

And to partially make up for their disappointment, Vera had hitched up a team to the surrey and sent them all over to a neighboring ranch to spend the day.

Now she was methodically going about the routine daily tasks just as though nothing had happened. It was best that way. As long as she kept doing something, she didn't have time to think about Henry. And she just couldn't let herself think about him. It seemed like his death wasn't quite real yet. There was that mound of earth and stones beneath the cottonwoods, but even that didn't make it seem real.

Vera hadn't realized before how much she depended on Henry. She had sort of pitied him for his lack of ability to make a go of the ranch, and hadn't really realized how much she had always leaned on him.

Now, faced with a future of widowhood, with five daughters to care for, it just seemed to her as though she couldn't go on. And she really didn't think she could have except for the faint hope Sam Sloan had implanted in her breast about the probability of extra money coming to Henry Hughes' family from the company after his death.

She clung to that hope desperately, and went on with her accustomed small tasks about the place.

When she heard a horse coming along the fence line behind her, she turned with the queerest flutter of anticipation in her heart, half expecting to see Henry. For one brief moment she forgot the new grave under the cottonwoods, and her face

was lit up with a smile of happy anticipation.

The smile slowly faded as she looked at the man who had stopped his horse ten feet away. He was certainly the queerest looking man Vera Hughes had ever seen. Like someone out of a circus sideshow, almost.

He was a short man, with extremely wide and powerful shoulders. A heavy matted beard of coarse black hair hid the lower portion of his face, showing high cheekbones and reddish skin above. His nose was straight and prominent, and fierce black eyes peered at her from under thatched black brows. He wore a flat-crowned, black sombrero, so old that it looked almost green, its brim flopping. There was nothing so unusual about that, but the rest of his outfit was something the like of which Vera Hughes had never seen in her life.

He wore a red cloth shirt outside of his trousers, coming down to his thighs, gathered tightly at the waist by a wide black belt. His trousers were also of tanned leather, tucked into a pair of high-heeled soft leather boots. When he lifted his hat to greet her, she saw that his hair was cut very short and bristled straight up all over his round head, in curious contrast to his heavy beard.

Vera tried not to gape at him impolitely. She smiled tentatively and said, "Good afternoon Mister. . . ?"

The stranger showed a double row of very white teeth between his mustaches and beard. He rumbled in a deep bass voice, "Ah! Madame veeshes for to know my name?" and he sounded happy and excited about it, speaking in a foreign accent which she had never heard before.

He threw his right leg over the saddle-horn and leaped agilely to the ground, bowed low before her.

"I ave ze honor of addressing Madame Hoos?"

"Why . . . yes." It took Vera a moment to realize that was his way of saying Hughes.

"Zen allow me to present myself to you. Yevgeyny Fyodorovich Kusmademyanski." He bowed almost to the ground.

"I'm very pleased to meet you,

Mister, uh—uh, Yev—" Vera's face reddened in embarrassment. "I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name."

"Ah!" He seemed to beam all over. "But off course. So, to you and to my ozzer frands I am somezing easier for you to say. Murphy. I am very proud zat I have sooch a fine American name."

Because he seemed so happy about it, Vera said "How—how do you do, Mister Murphy?"

The bushy eyebrows lifted. "'Ow I do Meester Murphy? Ah, but I do not do it, Madame Hoos. It iss my frand, Beeg-Foot McCann for whom I at one time worked as w'at you call a bullwhacker. Beeg-Foot. . ." His dark eyes clouded . . . "was boss-man off the Mountain Freight Company, because he did not learn how to say Roosian in school, he found my real name too uneasy to say. So he give me a name Americans know better. Iss better so, I theenk."

"It is a lot easier," agreed Vera. "Your friend was very helpful, wasn't he?"

HIS EYES grew stormy again. "My frand—my verry good frand," he muttered. "He was found in his office, shot through the head by his own gun. The gun was in his hand. . ." His voice trailed off, then he straightened, and struck himself on the chest with his clenched fist. "But I—who now carry the name Murphy—I know Beeg-Foot did not do zat zing. No! Beeg-Foot was murder! An' already I know who want him *kuput*; maybe the mans who hire heem keeled. Only one time I hear hees name, and now I do not remember. It is like, I think, somezing w'at you put on food to make taste more. W'at you do to food to make ze more taste?"

Vera Hughes frowned. This Russian was certainly one of the most peculiar people she had ever met, and very likely half mad. Yet, she decided, you couldn't help liking him, responding to his infectious enthusiasm and moods of gaiety. But, too, beneath it all there seemed that dark undercurrent of ferocity. He was something like a half-grown cub

whose playful antics made you forget that he carried death in the slashing blows of his paws.

"Food?" she hesitated. "Oh, you mean salt?"

"No salt. To make taste hot."

"Tabasco sauce?"

"No." He shook his head decisively. "Ah, yess. To make like zis." He drew a deep breath into his enormous chest and roared out, "Kerr-choo!"

"Pepper!" Vera cried at once.

He beamed. "But off course! You, Madame Hoos, are vunderful, smart vomans! Peppair!" Then his eyes narrowed a bit. "You know zat mans? You could tell me w'at he look like? Maybe you know someone who has seen heem?"

"No I never heard of him before."

"Zen I mus' find someone who can tell me. Peppair iss werry rich mans who live in New York, but out here he grab, grab, grab—land, ranches, mines, ouses, cattle. And ze freighter companies, like zat off my poor frand, Beeg-Foot.

"Leesten: For long years zis Beeg-Foot McCann work like madman. He sweat, he plan, he fight to own heemself a freighter company—you know, beeg wagons for to carry ore from mines to smelter; many oxen. At last, ah! my frand get zem all, and ze contract. Me, Murphy, he like, because I drive oxen bee-ootiful; vit' bullwhip I am magic mans, for bullwhip iss like our own Cossack whip back in Roosia. . . .

"Bot . . . anoizzer freighter company start up. Ve get some off our man kill'. Zen ve find ozzer freighters get ze ore promise to us, because zey charge almos' nozzing to haul it. Zey lose money, but v'en ve fight zem in court, zey laugh and show even more money. Ve dis-coover zen zat ziss Peppair, zis rich mans from New York, is behind zem to fight us, to—'ow you say?—to bust us, to keel us, maybe. . . .

"Beeg-Foot, he iss werry vorried. He borrow money to pay hees men. Zen he can borrow no more. He mus' sell out all zem lofely wagons, all zem nice oxen to ozzer company. Hees heart, it break. But he nevair stop

fightink, plannink to start out again—to build again from nozzing.

"Me, I halp a little, like ze ozzer men off our company, his frands. I play Mexican lottery to get money for Beeg-Foot. I win a leetle, bot iss not enough. Zen ve find Beeg-Foot like I say—dead, hees gon in hees hand in hees office. He no keel himself. No! Peppair's men do zat zing!

"Sometime Peppair come out to zis country. I, too, am smart mans. I haf plan to—w'at you say?—to bring heem out. And now I haf planty off money. Iss a trap, and I know he vill come. And ven he come out, I find heem, and zen—" His eyes glittered, and his hand rose and he snapped his fingers loudly three times. "Ve shall see who die!"

VERA HUGHES couldn't resist a shudder at the baleful look that momentarily stamped itself on the Russian's bearded face. But it was gone in an instant. He must have noticed her worried expression, for almost at once his broad face was wreathed in smiles.

"Ah, bot soch zings I should not say to vorry so charmink a vomans. So . . . Pliss forgive your frand Murphy. . . . Am I now forgive? I so hope zat I am. And now ve forget zose ugly zings? Yess, iss better to forget, and for you, Madame Hoos, to tell no one, evair, zat I say eem to you!"

Vera could not quite decide whether or not those last words carried a threat or not. But at any rate, she was glad that he seemed to be happy again. There was some appealing, childlike quality about this strange man that seemed to reach out to her; that made her forget, at least momentarily, her grief at her husband's death and her worry of the future that stretched darkly before her.

Her eyes wide, she nodded. "It will be our secret then, if you wish it that way," she agreed.

The Russian took her toil-worn hand between his huge palms and turned it up, bending forward slightly as though he intended to press his lips to it. He hesitated and asked "Madame doss not beleef zese zings zat people say about me, no?"

Vera frowned and tried to draw her hand away from his. He was undoubtedly insane, but most of the time he seemed very nice and gentle for all that. She didn't want to anger him and make him violent. "Believe the things they say about you?" she repeated. "What things that who say?"

A worried, childlike frown replaced the smile on the Russian's face. "You cannot beleef zese zings, Madame Hoos. You 'ave ze kind face an' ze understanding look."

"Of course not," she assured him quickly. Then she remembered she didn't know what he was talking about, and added, "That is, I really don't know."

"You don't know? You don't know eef you beleef zese zo terrible zings?" He threw his arms up in a passionate gesture and turned his face to the sky. "I swear to you, Madame Hoos, zat I do not do zese awful zings." He stooped and peered earnestly into her face. "You mus' beleef me, no?"

Vera stammered, "Of course, I beleef. . . I mean, I believe. . ."

"You beleef vich?" he boomed at her. "You beleef me—Murphy—or zose people zat zay zose zings?"

"I think I believe Murphy . . . that is, I mean, I'm quite sure I believe you."

He caught her hand up again and pressed a happy and blubbery kiss on the palm before she could withdraw it. "Zank you, Madame Hoos. Zank you zo werry moch. Now ve vill talk an' be frands, no?"

"Why . . . yes. I suppose so. Shall we sit on the porch?" Vera still wondered what on earth it was she didn't believe about him. But if it was bad she certainly *didn't* believe it. He really had such a kind face. That is, she felt quite sure he would have if she could see it behind the bushy black whiskers.

Murphy laughed and clapped his hands together like a small child. "Madame ask me to zit on her porch? Iss good. Ve drink togezzer, no, to show how ve be frands?"

"Of course we will." Vera hurried ahead of him toward the porch. "I'll get some apple cider."

"Ah, bot no," he shouted from behind her. "I haff ze podado cider an' ziss ve vill drink for frandship. Iff Madame Hoos vill get ze glasses."

Vera said, "Certainly," and hurried inside. She had never heard of potato cider, but she supposed it would be all right. And she thought it would be best to humor the strange man.

WHEN she came back out on the porch with two large tumblers he was approaching with a pair of large goatskin bags dangling from his hand which he had lifted down from the back of his saddle. They bulged and were pouched together with thongs about the top, and they gurgled as he set them down carefully on the top step.

"I never tasted potato cider," she admitted shyly, offering him the glasses. "Do you drink it much in your country?"

"In my countree it iss ze national drink. Ven za babee leave his mothair's breast he iss cry for vodka." He smacked his thick lips ecstatically, turned to look at the large glasses with surprise and then smiled admiringly at Vera. "Ah, Madame Hoos iss indeed ze wondairful drinkair, no? You 'ave ze gr-reat Amairacan vay off ze bottoms up, yess?"

"Why . . . yes," Vera agreed, feeling a little proud of herself, though not quite knowing why. After all, she reassured herself, a glass of his drink certainly shouldn't do her any harm if babies cried for it in his country.

"I haf ze gr-r-reatest respect for ze voman vich can drink zo moch more zan me." He got down on his knees and unlaced the top of one of his bags and dipped a glass down, bringing it out full to the brim of a colorless liquid which he handed to her deferentially. He dipped a more conservative portion of vodka into his own glass, lifted it and looked with reverence at this unusual woman who hadn't protested when he filled her glass to the brim. "To Madame Hoos, she zat iss mak frands for ze lonely Roosian." He tilted his glass and swallowed the contents in two quick gulps.

Vera threw back her head and

recklessly imitated the lonely Russian. She swallowed half the glassful before the powerful vodka had a chance to start burning her throat and stomach. Then she uttered a startled exclamation, leaped up and ran into the kitchen, frantically clutching her throat.

Yevgevy looked after her in surprise. Never before had he seen a woman of such terrific drinking prowess. Presently he heard Vera call out in a choking voice, "Wouldn't you like some water with yours, Mr. Murphy?"

"Water?" he shouted back in an insulted tone. "Bot zank you, no. Vater an' vodka are bad in ze Roosian stomach togethair."

Vera reappeared carrying a glass half full of cold water. She had already downed two glasses and she was beginning to wonder why it didn't put out the fire that was consuming her. She looked at her guest questioningly and repeated, "Vodka?" in a weak voice.

Then she collapsed in the porch chair and giggled, "Oh, yes. Russia. Vodka. An alcoholic drink." She hiccupped gently and wiped tears from her eyes, set the water glass down beside the glass still half full of vodka.

"Madame Hoos does not like Murphy's vodka?" He was deeply concerned and contrite.

"But I do. Madame Hoos . . . that is, I do like it very much. I didn't realize potato cider would be so strong." Her eyes watered again and she groped for the water glass beside her chair. Her fingers encountered the vodka glass first and she lifted it to her lips and took a sip of it. It tasted boiling hot and she confusedly wondered if she had set it in the sun, but she was getting dizzy now and couldn't think things out very well.

He watched her sip from the vodka glass with increasing admiration. His deep voice trembled with emotion when he exclaimed, "Bot zees iss vondairful. Not in Murphy's life hass he zeen like zees viz ze vodka. Ze beeg drink fast, yess. Bot ze leetle drinks slow, no. Nevair before 'ave I see zees."

VERA didn't know what he was talking about, but it didn't seem to matter. After all, she hadn't really understood a thing he'd said since he came. She had a very comfortable feeling that nothing mattered very much any more, and she was grateful to the bearded Russian for making her feel that way. She took another sip and found the supposed water had cooled off considerably.

"After I finish this glass I think I'd better start getting dinner ready," she murmured vaguely. "You'll stay, of course."

Murphy's black eyes glistened with pride. "Madame Hoos hass ze good frands for me zat she iss ask to eat at her table?"

"Of course I want you to stay for dinner, Mr. Murphy."

He clapped his hands and laughed happily. "Ve vill eat an' zen ve vill drink more togezzer."

"By the way!" Vera was vaguely conscious there was something she should ask her guest. "What are those terrible things people are saying about you that I don't believe?"

Yevgevy waved a broad hand. "It iss nozing eef Madame iss not beleef."

"Of course I don't believe it," Vera said with asperity. "But I think I should know what it is I don't believe."

He said, "No," promptly. "Iss onpleasant weeth frands."

"But I don't know you very well." Vera set the glass down. She got up carefully and staggered a little. Murphy leaped to his feet and supported her by catching her hand.

She smiled at him timidly and said, "I must kill a chicken for dinner. My girls will be home soon."

"Doss Madame 'ave ze leetle wans?" He looked at her in astonishment.

"Of course I have. Five lovely little girls." Vera held tightly to his hand and got down the steps without stumbling.

"Bot zat iss vonderful!" he exclaimed. "Murphy loffs ze leetle wans. Ven I vass yong in Roosia, I haff fife leetle sistairs zat I loff werry moch." His voice saddened. "Bot zen I mus' leef my home in ze Urals an hide."

"Hide from what?" Vera de-

manded. With Murphy's help she was making her way carefully to the chicken pen. Her legs seemed unaccountably shortened and the ground threatened to come right up and hit her in the face each time she took a step.

"Ven I am yong I fight injustice off vich is moch in Roosia. Ze Tsar iss bad like no one you haff here."

Vera said, "That's too bad." She shaded her hand to look at the chickens in the pen. "I'll try to pick out a fat young hen."

"I vill keel ze hen for you," Murphy offered. "You wait vile I breeng my frand who helps me to keel always an' so queeck lak nozzing."

"Do you have a friend with you?" Vera asked incredulously. "Perhaps we'd better kill two chickens."

His laughter boomed out. "Bot no. Ziss frand vill not eat. I get heem."

He left Vera leaning against a post while he strode away to his horse. She watched wonderingly while he took down what looked like a coiled lariat from a thong at his saddle-horn.

HE LET it uncoil behind him as he came striding back, and she saw it wasn't a common lariat. It was much thicker at the end he held in his hand, and it narrowed down uniformly to a lash hardly larger than a matchstick at the other end of its forty-foot length. It was beautifully and smoothly braided of tiny strips of leather, so supple that it seemed almost a living thing in the Russian's hands as he exhibited it to her proudly.

"It ees ze veapon off ze Cossacks," he explained to her. "I breeng heem from Roosia ven I come to hide. Vich cheecken do ve vant?"

Vera Hughes was staring at the long whip with fascinated eyes. "Can you pop that thing?"

Murphy laughed boisterously. "Bot off corze, only in Roosia ve do not pop ze wheep for fun. I vill show you, aftair I 'ave keel for you."

"That red hen in the middle of the yard," Vera pointed suddenly.

Murphy's wrist gave the merest flick. The whiplash sped forward through the dust as though endowed

with human intelligence and snapped the head off the red hen as neatly as it could have been severed with an ax.

He whooped triumphantly and lifted his arm above his head and cracked the whip three times loudly and in rapid succession.

"Zese three pops," he told Vera, "iss ze vay off my family in Roosia ven we keel anyzing. Always ve make ze three pops like zat so everybody knows a Kuzmademyanski has made ze keel. Also, now, ven I, myself—Murphy—keel, I make ze three pops."

He stopped suddenly as he saw the tense look of hatred on Vera Hughes' face, mingled with understanding and revulsion.

"I've heard those same three pops before," she cried out wildly. "Just last night. When Henry was murdered. It was you! You and your terrible whip. And now—after what you did, you dare to come here. . . !"

She broke off and began sobbing, covered her face with her hands and ran toward the house.

He was instantly startled and saddened. He didn't understand except that he had done something terribly wrong and what had promised to be a beautiful friendship was now shattered. He shook his head sadly and followed her to the porch to gather up his bags of vodka, then mounted and rode away, shaking his head and muttering to himself in his beard.

CHAPTER VII

KITTY SLOAN stood in the doorway of the little shack that was the only real home she had ever known, and looked about inside the bare room with troubled eyes. She was sure she was forgetting something. The buckboard outside was piled high with boxes and packages, and Ezra was waiting patiently to drive her over to the Lazy Mare ranch to stay with Pat and Sally Stevens until she heard from Sam, but Kitty was loath to leave the little Pony Express station.

Her blue eyes became misty with tears as she stood in the doorway taking a last look around. She didn't think anyone had ever been happier

than she and Sam had been here. Now it was being taken over by a couple of rough Express riders who wouldn't appreciate it at all. To them it would just be a place to sleep in at night and in which to cook their simple meals.

She pulled her pink sunbonnet down to shade her face from the hot sun and went out to Ezra.

He stood by the front wheels of the buckboard holding the lines in his left hand and a blanket-wrapped bundle under his right arm. He had the blanket pushed back and was peering down intently at young Sammy Ezra as Kitty approached him. He looked up at her sorrowfully and shook his red head. "He shore don't git no purtier, does he?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Kitty smiled and held out her arms to take the baby. "Nonsense, Ezra. He looks more like his father every day."

"Lord forbid," Ezra muttered piously. "That's a turrible thing tuh say 'bout a little tyke what can't talk back." He helped Kitty up to the front seat, then went around and clambered up beside her. He yelled at the team and they lunged away excitedly. He gave them their heads for a few minutes, knowing the heat would soon slow them down, and they drew away from the little way station rapidly.

Kitty turned to look back, and she watched it slowly become lost in the heat haze behind them. When she turned back she told Ezra in a choked voice, "I feel cut loose from everything. As if I won't ever have a home of my own again."

Ezra glanced at her with his one eye and saw the tears in her eyes. He cleared his throat and said loudly, "Sho' now, ef that there little weazel yo're married to don't fix you up a nice house up yonder, you jest let ol' Ezra know an' I'll give him a good talkin' to."

"I know it's silly of me to feel this way," Kitty admitted. "But I get worried about Sam. I'm afraid he'll get into some kind of trouble up there."

"Him? That little sawed-off runt?" Ezra laughed loudly. "Why, he ain't got tuh guts tuh hunt up no trouble,

Ma'am. Not Sam Sloan. Never seed a man that c'u'd run half as fast ef he even smelled trouble."

"That's not the way I've heard it. Why, you and Pat and Sam were always out killing someone before he married me."

"'Twasn't never none of his doin'," Ezra assured her solemnly. "He'd allus hide out when thuh shootin' started. No Ma'am, I shore wouldn't worry none 'bout Sam ef I was you."

Kitty looked at him suspiciously, but Ezra's scarred, red-whiskered face told her nothing. She sighed and said, "Maybe Mr. Stranch was right then, when he selected Sam for the job. He wanted someone who would settle arguments peaceably instead of going for a gun."

"What kinda argyments?" Ezra demanded. "Why'd he expect any trouble openin' up uh new Pony Express route? Sounds tuh me mighty nigh as dang'rous as runnin' a necktie store in Denver."

"Oh, but it's likely to be dangerous," Kitty protested. "There are a lot of people in Cheyenne angry because the route is going to Laramie instead, and they're likely to cause trouble."

"Yuh don't say?" Ezra was becoming interested. "Mebby I had ought tuh ride up there an' see does Sam need some help."

"I thought perhaps you would take me up there as soon as I get a letter from Sam saying he wants me."

"Yuh mean tuh say you gotta wait fer a letter tellin' yuh that?" Ezra demanded belligerently. "What kinda husband is Sam? By golly, ef I had uh purty wife like you I'd shore want her around where I was at. I tell yuh, Ma'am, I'd quit him cold ef I was you. Thass what I'd do."

KITTY smiled serenely and said, "I expect he'll write as soon as he can arrange for a place for Sammy and me to stay."

"He better," Ezra muttered ominously. "Shouldn't ort've gone traipsin' off in the fust place. Now me, I'd uh took that there job if Sam'd sent the feller tuh me. I'm the one they orta have up there if there's trouble."

Kitty laughed and explained, "That's exactly what Mr. Stranch is trying to avoid. That's why he came to Dutch Springs to hire the only married rider in his district."

"Sounds tuh me like a hell of a pore way to run a bizniss," Ezra muttered deep in his beard. He shook his head disgustedly and shouted at the lagging team. Things had changed from the old days, awright. Usta be they'd hire a man with a reputation for being fast with his guns if trouble was anticipated. Now it was exactly the other way around.

Ezra brooded silently over this melancholy state of affairs for the remainder of the trip across country to the Lazy Mare ranch, rousing himself as they approached to look at Kitty and ask her gruffly, "You makin' it all right?"

She laughed ruefully. "Just bounced a little. A buckboard isn't the easiest riding vehicle in the world."

"Shore hain't," he agreed. "But we're most there. You kin see tuh ranch house yonder over that rise."

Kitty held the baby closer to her breast and looked forward hopefully as they drew up to the Lazy Mare ranch. It was her first visit with the Stevenses and she knew she was going to enjoy getting better acquainted with Sally, though she did hope the visit wouldn't be too prolonged while she waited for Sam's letter.

Ezra pulled the buckboard up in front of the door with a flourish. He jumped out and went around to take the baby down from Kitty's hands just as Sally came running out to greet her guest.

"You be careful, Ezra," Sally cried out in fright. "Don't drop him."

Ezra scowled at her disgustedly. "As if I'd drop a baby what was named after me."

Sally laughed and nodded to Kitty as she took the baby from Ezra's hands. "I'm so glad you've come," she told Kitty sincerely. "And I hope you'll stay for a good long visit."

"Hasn't any letter come for me from Sam yet?" Kitty asked anxiously. "I told him to address it in care of the Lazy Mare ranch."

"Not yet. But Pat's in town now. He may bring one out. Come in out of the hot sun."

"Yeh, go ahead on in," Ezra ordered them both. "I'll unload this stuff an' bring it in."

"Looks like you've got a steady job," Sally laughed, "taking care of your partners' wives and families."

"Yeh. While they're off havin' themselves a good time," Ezra growled. "But I will say they got mighty good taste in wives, so I ain't kicking."

THE TWO women went indoors laughing together and Ezra quickly unloaded Kitty's belongings and carried them into the spare bedroom. He drove the team around to the corral and unharnessed the horses, then came stamping back into the long cool living room where Sally and Kitty were laughing together as though they were girlhood chums.

"I bin thinkin' 'bout what yuh tol' me," he announced solemnly to Kitty, "an' I'm plumb worried 'bout that no-good husban' of yores gettin' into trouble up yonder all by hisself. I reckon mebbly I had oughtta take a ride up yonder an' see does he need any help."

"Now you behave yourself, Ezra," Sally told him indignantly. "You're never satisfied unless you're getting Pat or Sam into trouble."

"Me? Gettin' *them* two intuh trouble?" Ezra asked incredulously. "Now I ask yuh, Sally, is that fair? After all thuh times I've got 'em outta trouble?"

She laughed helplessly and told Kitty, "Ezra just can't stand to think he may be missing something. And Pat's almost as bad as he is."

"Tain't fair fer Sam tuh have all thuh fun," Ezra burst out angrily. "Him bein' a fambly man an' all. Be jest like him tuh run into a bunch of gun-fighters an' try tuh han'le 'em by hisself. An' I bet he won't tell nobody a word 'bout it neither. Now if I had a purty wife an' a baby tuh home an' I ran into trouble, you jest bet I'd send fer my ol' friends to come an' help me out."

"Oh, Sally, do you think he's right?" Kitty breathed anxiously.

"Do you think Sam is in any danger up there?"

Sally laughed and tossed her pretty blond head. "Don't listen to Ezra. He's just like an old fire horse forever sniffing smoke. Of course there's no danger in a job such as Sam took."

"You never kin tell what Sam'll smoke out," Ezra warned them both darkly. "An' I shore feel sorry fer him tryin' tuh han'le anything by hisself."

Pat Stevens came striding in the front door just then. He said, "Hello there, Kitty. I'm glad to see Ezra got you over here all in one piece. What'll you give me for a letter?"

"A kiss," she told him promptly, "if it's the right letter."

Ezra snorted disgustedly. He muttered, "Carryin' on like that soon's Sam's back is turned," but the others paid no attention to him.

Pat handed Kitty a letter and kissed her forehead lightly, then turned to Sally and asked with twinkling eyes, "Doesn't that make you jealous, old lady?"

"Not as long as you do it in front of me. But if you ever. . ."

"It's from Sam," Kitty cried delightedly. She sank down into a chair and began to read the crudely printed words.

Ezra snorted again and stalked forward. "What's he say? Yellin' fer he's awready, I betcha. Done found he's bit off more'n he kin chew an' wants his ol' pardners to come an' he's out, huh?"

Kitty looked up as though she hadn't heard him, and then smiled and shook her head. "Oh, no," she breathed happily. "He doesn't say a word about any trouble. And he wants me to come up right away. He wants you to come up with me, Ezra, if you can get away from your ranch for a few days. Wait, I'll read what he says to all of you." She looked down at the letter and read aloud:

"Dear wife,

"Everything is coming along just fine and it looks like the job will be real easy. I got it fixed for you to stay with Mrs. Hughes on her ranch on account of she's got five little gals of her own and wants company so she

won't get so lonesome with her husband gone."

"That's funny," said Kitty, looking up with a frown. "I wonder where Mr. Hughes has gone. He's the man Sam was to work with, you know. Mr. Stranch told us about him and his nice family." She went back to reading Sam's letter:

"So I thought maybe you'd better ask Ezra to see if he can bring you up on the train to Denver and then hire an outfit there to drive to the Hughes' ranch right away so she won't do so much thinking about her poor husband. There ain't been no trouble on the job a-tall. Your loving husband, Sam Sloan."

"I wonder what on earth he means?" Kitty sighed. "He's the most exasperating man. What do you suppose he means by saying I can help keep Mrs. Hughes from thinking about her poor husband? Oh! Here's a postscript I didn't see. He says:

"P. S. Mr. Hughes got murdered the night I got here. Looks like them skunks from Cheyenne that don't want the route going to Laramie. Tell Ezra to bring his guns. Sam."

"What'd I tell yuh?" Ezra exulted. "Hollerin' fer help, thass what. Prob'ly got his own goozle cut by this time. . ."

"Ezra!" said Sally sharply. "Don't say such things. Don't you see how you're frightening Kitty?"

SHE GOT up and went swiftly to the other woman and took both her hands. "Don't let it worry you, Kitty. You'll have to get used to things like this, being married to Sam. Goodness knows, I've had to."

"But it sounds terrible," Kitty sobbed. "If they've already murdered Mr. Hughes, Sam will be next."

"Sam can take care of himself," Sally told her sharply.

"You bet he can," Pat Stevens put in. "U-m-m." He rubbed his chin reflectively and glanced sideways at his wife. "I might make a trip up that way myself. Ezra could look after the Lazy Mare all right, with his ranch lying right alongside it."

"You get that idea right out of your head," Sally told him furiously. "Mr. Stranch doesn't want any

trouble up there, so you'd better stay at home."

"You betcha," put in Ezra, glaring at him with his one eye. "What d'yuh mean, I could take keer of tuh Lazy Mare? I was figgerin' on you takin' keer of my place while I go up an' get Sam straightened out."

"Both of you sound as though it was some sort of a picnic," said Kitty bitterly. "You don't seem to realize a man has been murdered . . . and that five little girls are left fatherless . . . and, and that Sam may be the next one." She put her face down in her hands and began sobbing.

"Both of you clear out of here," Sally stormed at them. "Kitty isn't used to your ways. It'll be all right, Kitty," she went on softly, "and I'm not going to urge you to stay here. You go right on up there where you can be with Sam. Ezra will drive you to Hopewell Junction tomorrow night."

"You bet I will," Ezra was in high spirits now. "All I gotta do is ride over to tuh ranch an' get me a clean shirt an' my guns. Sam'll be needin' some expert he'p with his boss bein' killed off like that, so we better not waste any time."

CHAPTER VIII

SAM SLOAN made it in to Denver the second day after Henry Hughes' death. He had ridden over most of the route in the meantime, checking the station locations Hughes had tentatively selected, and talking to ranchers along the route. Hughes had a bunch of good riders lined up and his station locations were excellent. The most important thing still to be done was getting together enough fast horses for the new route.

With his own experience in riding the mail, Sam knew how important the selection of horses was. The regular western cow-pony just didn't make the grade. They weren't trained for that kind of work, and wouldn't stand up to it. Now and then it was possible to find one that fitted the exacting Pony Express requirements, but the majority of the horses used on the routes were half-bred Morgans

mixed with heavier stock for greater stamina, and Sam knew it would be quite a problem to gather up the fifty or sixty that would be needed.

But Mrs. Hughes had told him that her husband had arranged a deal with some commission house in Denver to purchase a whole herd of blooded horses from them, and Sam was anxious to get in the close the deal.

It was the middle of the afternoon when he reached the city from the north. He splashed through the shallow ford at Cherry Creek and rode on up into the cobblestoned business area where the Pony Express offices were located on Lawrence Street.

He dismounted with a tired grunt in front of the office and tied his reins to a post to keep his horse from getting frightened by the drays and delivery wagons rumbling up and down the streets.

He walked in stiffly and nodded to a clerk who got up and came forward from the rear. "I wanta see Jim Stranch."

The clerk looked him over coldly. Sam's clothing was powdered with trail dust and he looked like any down-and-out cowpoke applying for a job.

"Mr. Stranch is busy," the clerk told him, "and besides he doesn't do any hiring here. You'll have to go to the employment office. . ."

Sam reached over the railing and grabbed the front of the clerk's shirt with a steel-like grip. "I ain't in no mood tuh git pushed around," he muttered. "Which way's his office?"

"Right . . . right back through that door," the clerk stammered. "But you can't do that. It isn't allowed."

Sam snorted contemptuously and shoved him aside. He kicked the little wooden gate open and stalked back through the door indicated. It led into a large room with two more shirt-sleeved clerks hunched over desks, and a closed door beyond was marked PRIVATE. Curious rumblings not unlike the roll of distant thunder came from the closed door. The two clerks were listening to the noise and grinning at each other. They both jumped guiltily when Sam strode in unannounced, and busied

themselves with papers in front of them.

Sam stopped in the middle of the floor and asked loudly, "That Stranch's office?"

They both looked up as if surprised to see him there, and nodded their heads. "But he's busy," one of them said.

The other one laughed. "I don't think Mr. Stranch would really mind being interrupted."

"Perhaps not," the other agreed with a smile. He explained to Sam. "Mr. Stranch has a caller who simply refuses to leave."

"Why'n't he throw him out?" Sam grunted.

They both looked frightened at the suggestion. "He's very large and ill-tempered."

"Tuh hell with this way of doin' bizness," Sam growled. "I ain't got all day." He strode forward and jerked the door open, and the deep booming voice of Mr. Stranch's visitor rolled out with the crashing roar of a thousand stampeding longhorns.

JIM STRANCH jumped up from behind a littered desk at sight of Sam, and shouted happily, "Come right on in, Sloan."

The booming voice stopped. A heavy-set figure was leaning over Stranch's desk, waggling a thick forefinger in his face. He turned slowly as Stranch hurried forward to meet Sam, and Sam saw a broad face covered with a matted black beard thicker than Ezra's, and a pair of flashing black eyes that surveyed him angrily.

Stranch caught hold of Sam's hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically. "Glad to see you, Sloan. Mighty glad to see you! You've talked with Hughes, I presume, and are ironing everything out?"

"I bin out to Hughes' place," Sam admitted. He looked past Stranch at the short, bearded man who was frowning at them angrily. Sam had never seen a get-up like that on a man before. The stranger's red shirt looked as if he had forgotten to tuck the tails inside his pants; it hung down and was belted about his waist.

His pants were of leather, yet they certainly weren't the shotgun chaps that Sam was used to seeing in some parts of the cattle country. His pants-legs were tucked into the tops of soft leather boots.

"Oh, yes," said Stranch awkwardly. "Let me introduce Mister—Mister M-Murphy." He mumbled the name as if he were not sure of it. "Perhaps you can understand him, Sloan. He's making a complaint about our service . . . something about the new route."

"Meestair Stench!" the Russian roared angrily. "You do me ze insult of tailink me I no spik Amer-ricain lenkvich so good like yourself? Nevair before do I half zis trouble; I, Murphy, who can spik pairfect in many lenkviches—ze French, ze Spanish, ze Amer-ricain—"

"I'm sorry about not understanding you," Stranch sighed wearily, "but you'll have to confess your accent is rather difficult."

"Zere iss nozzing off accent in 'ow I spik your lenkvich!" the Russian declared heatedly. "I haf ze good Americain name Murphy; zerefore I can spik pairfect. Bot I am werry glad tor know you, Meestair Sloan."

Sam grinned and stuck out his hand: "Glad tuh meet yuh, Murph." And he instantly warmed to the answering, all-embracing smile that seemed to break through the beard.

"Ah!" the stranger beamed. "Zat iss good; zat, I like—Murph! Beeg-Foot McCann, he always called me like zat. Ve vill be good frands, no, you and me, Meestair Sloan?"

"Sure thing," Sam returned the smile. "An' you kin fergit thuh handle. Just plain Sam will do me fine."

"Sem . . . Sam," the Russian muttered delightedly. Then his forehead furrowed. "Sam, my new frand," he said, "half you ever heard off a man called Peppair?"

Sam scratched his head. "Peppare? Can't say I have. He come from these parts? A friend uh yores, mebbe?"

"Not Pep-pair," the Russian said. "Pep-pair. Like you make ze sneeze."

"Oh," said Sam. "I see. Pepper. Nope. Never heard of him. Did you, Stranch?"

Stranch shook his head. "He's not employed by the Pony Express," he said. "And so far as I know I never heard of anyone by that name."

"Zank you," Murphy murmured politely as Sam turned to Stranch and hooked one leg over the corner of his desk. He drawled, "I reckon you aint' heard the bad news about Hughes yet?"

"What bad news is that?" Stranch went around and sat in his swivel chair.

"He's dead," Sam reported tersely.

"Zat iss right," the Russian put in happily. "Zat iss vat I am tal Meestair Stench all zis time. Meestair Hoos is dead. Zo ze route she mus' go to Cheyenne, no?"

"Wait a minute," Stranch said sharply. "What's this, Sloan? Hughes dead? He was healthy enough a few days ago. Must have been a sudden attack."

"Mighty sudden an' mighty dead-ly," Sam agreed. "A busted neck."

"An accident?"

"Murder!"

"Bot zese zings vat people zay about me are not ze true," Murphy shouted. "I'm tell Madame Hoos, like I'm tell you now, Sam. And like I'm tell Meestair Stench."

STRANCH sighed and shook his head distractedly. He ran his fingers through his hair and told Sam, "It's been going on like this for hours. I can't make heads or tails out of his talk."

"Let's let him say whatever he wants to an' get rid of him," Sam suggested. He turned to the Russian. "What are you tryin' tuh tell Stranch?"

"Bot I 'ave tal him an' tal him," muttered Murphy. "I zink he ees not listen to me."

"Awright," Sam said good-naturedly. "I'll lissen tuh you. We're friends, yuh know. Go ahead an' spill it."

Murphy showed his splendid white teeth in a wide smile of gratitude. "Zat iss goot. Iss lak ziss. I am Roosian off ze noble blod. I liff by Cheyenne vair I hide in ze voods."

"Hide from what?" demanded Stranch.

The Russian waved the question aside contemptuously. He continued to speak directly to Sam whom he seemed to regard as a kindred and understanding soul. "Vat matters from vat I hide. I, Murphy, hide in ze voods an' dreenk ze vodka an' dream off ze Roosia he vill neffer see agair." Tears came into the big man's eyes. He got out a handkerchief and wiped them away hastily but unashamedly.

"What's all this got to do with me?" Stranch asked impatiently.

The Russian did not deign to look at him. He told Sam, "After ze vodka, I am loff gamblink werry moch. I 'ave ze moch monee an' ze moch time, an' nozzing else. Murphy iss verry onhappy onless he iss dreenkink vodka an' making ze gamble on lotairres from ze Mexico."

"Do you know what the hell he's talking about?" Stranch demanded fretfully of Sam.

"Seems like I'm gettin' the hang of it an' then seems like I ain't," Sam answered truthfully. "He's a rich Russian, I reckon, hidin' out in thuh woods near Cheyenne from somethin' an' spendin' his money gamblin' on the Mexican lotteries from down around Santa Fe, I reckon. I shore don't know what drinkin' this here vodka has got tuh do with nothin', nor what he wants from you."

"Vodka is a sort of Russian liquor," Stranch told him wearily.

"Shore, I know that."

"Well, go on," sighed Stranch. "I thought you were going to get rid of him."

"I will. . . soon's I find out what's eatin' him." Sam turned back to the bearded Russian and said good-naturedly, "Awright. If yo're happy drinkin' vodka an' gamblin' on thuh lotteries, why are yuh worried 'bout thuh Pony Express route goin' tuh Laramie 'stead of Cheyenne?"

"Bot zat ees it!" The man spread out his big hands excitedly. "Zat iss vat I am tal you. Mus' go by Cheyenne zo I can do my gamblink queek an' not loose ze many days waitin' for ze mail. I send ze monee for lotairre an get ze tickets back in ze mail. Zen in ze mail comms ze vinning nombairs an' ze tickets mus' go

back in ze mail for get ze vinnings. Iss too slow by mail. Always I am haf to comm to Denwer to get ze tickets an' I am loose time from make ze vodka." He smiled happily, "You ondairstand now?"

"Sorta," Sam agreed dubiously. "I reckon you get it now," he added to Stranch. "He ain't got no int'rest in life bot makin' this here vodka an' drinkin' it, an' gambling on thuh New Mexico lotteries. But the reg'ler mail's too slow fer him an' he has tuh come to Denver tuh get his tickets an' winnings off the Pony Express, an' he figgers as how if thuh mail route went through Cheyenne he could stay right there in his hideout, drunk on vodka all thuh time an' keep up his gamblin', too. That about it, Murph?"

"Zat iss it." He nodded happily. "You are ze goot frand for ondairstan'. Ze pony mail mus' go to Cheyenne, no?"

STRANCH closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. The Russian watched him with a confident and childlike smile. He slowly opened his eyes and looked at the bearded man as he might look at a small child asking for the moon. "No," he said gently.

Murphy's face clouded, "No?" he asked incredulously.

"No," Stranch repeated.

The Russian raised his clenched fists and beat his chest loudly. He opened his mouth to shout out about the injustice of the decision, but Stranch cut him off.

"I'm sorry, Mister M-Murphy, but my company isn't interested in your difficulties about getting lottery tickets up here in a hurry. You'll have to make your own arrangements about getting them from Denver to Cheyenne."

"Bot Meestair Hoos iss dead," the Russian reminded him. "Zat means ze route iss dead, no?"

"No," said Stranch emphatically. "Sam Sloan here will take Hughes' place and put the route through to Laramie."

"Ziss iss true?" Murphy demanded of Sam.

"I reckon so," drawled Sam.

"Zen ve are no longer ze frands," the man thundered as though he pronounced a curse upon Sam Sloan. "I vill go now. I vill start ze Pony mail off my own to Cheyenne." He stamped out angrily and slammed the door behind him.

Jim Stranch sank back and mopped his forehead while Sam grinned at him.

"The man's stark staring mad!" Stranch exclaimed. "He must have all sorts of money to throw around to talk about starting a private mail route to Cheyenne just to get his lottery tickets faster. And I don't like him calling himself Murphy. Seems someone gave him that name as a joking nickname. Damned irregular; almost dishonest!"

"I reckon he's one of them there Russian dooks or somethin' that run off with thuh fambly jools," Sam agreed. "And Murphy's probably a lot easier to say than his real name. I kin see what's eatin' on him, though. When they draw the numbers in them Mexican lotteries, the winnin' tickets have jest so long tuh get back tuh Santa Fe tuh get paid off. A man might lose a hunk of winnings by bein' a day late."

"That's not our affair," Stranch said stiffly. "He's crazy to think we'll change our plans just to accommodate him."

"He's plumb loco, awright," Sam agreed. "You want me tuh go on with thuh job, huh?"

"I guess so. I haven't had time to think things out. Hughes' death is a terrible blow. Such a good man. And all those children. You say he was murdered?"

"That's right." In a few words, Sam told him all he knew about the tragedy. "Looked like his neck was broke by one jerk of a rawhide riata," he grated. "Ain't many of them used in these parts. When I find the skunk that carries one I'll settle with him personal."

"Please, Sloan. We want no violence. I warned you of that before."

"It's time for violence when men get murdered," Sam argued angrily.

"Do you suppose his death had anything to do with the route?" Stranch

asked anxiously. "I'd hate to think the company was responsible."

"That's one thing I wanta talk about. He's got a paycheck comin', I reckon."

"Why, yes. Not quite a full month. But we'll be generous. I'll see that nothing is deducted from it."

"I thought mebby you could do more'n that," Sam muttered. "Ain't there company insurance? Somethin' fer a widow an' bunch of kids?"

"Not for a man who's been with the company less than a month. I don't see how any extra payment would be justified."

"Awright," aid Sam. "Mebby the company don't give a damn. But I gotta little money in tuhuh bank at Dutch Springs. I'd like tuhuh fix it so's you could turn some of that over to tuhuh widow an' let her think it's from the company-like."

"There's no call for you to waste your money that way," Stranch objected. "I don't see that you have any obligation toward the widow."

"I ain't askin' you," Sam told him harshly. "I jest want you tuhuh fix it so's she won't know it come from me."

"Of course. If you wish it that way," Stranch shook his head with a frown. "I don't mind admitting this worries me. If the Cheyenne interests are going to resort to murder to gain their end, I'm inclined to open the matter again with the board of directors and see if I can't get them to reconsider."

SAM frowned at him angrily. "You mean you'd let 'em scare you into changin' the route."

"We have to be reasonable about it," Stranch argued. "Think about Mrs. Hughes and those five children. Think about your own wife and baby, Mr. Sloan."

Sam's mouth hung wide open as he stared incredulously at the manager. "Let them coyotes run us off?" he demanded in a choked voice.

"But I can't have my men being murdered." Jim Stranch got up and began pacing the floor. "I had no idea they were so determined. There have been rumors of threats, but I discounted those."

"I reckon somebody in Cheyenne

stands tuhuh lose some money by the route goin' to Laramie," Sam guessed shrewdly.

"Perhaps so. I know some Eastern business interests have invested heavily in new town-sites expecting the town to expand with the new route. No doubt they stand to lose their investment."

"Who are they?" Sam demanded angrily. "Le's smoke 'em out. If they're behind Hughes gettin' killed, I'd shore admire tuhuh meet up with 'em." Unconsciously his hand went down to fondle the butt of his holstered six-gun.

Stranch stopped his pacing and complained, "That's not the sort of talk I expected from you, Sloan. And I don't like to see you carrying that gun either. I always say that sort of thing invites trouble."

Sam growled, "Tuhuh hell you do?"

"Yes," Stranch threw out his hands despairingly. "Don't you see what it leads to? One death already."

"I don't reckon Hughes was packin' no gun."

"Perhaps not." Stranch spoke with sudden decision. "I think I'll call a meeting of the Board tonight to reconsider the matter."

"You mean tuhuh give up tuhuh idee of tuhuh line?"

"Surely, you don't want to go ahead against that sort of odds?" Stranch looked at him in surprise. Then his face cleared. "Oh, I think I understand." He nodded. "This position is quite a rise in the world for you, isn't it? You'd be ashamed to quit and go back to Powder Valley to your old job. Well, you needn't worry about that. I'll see that you're put in charge of the Cheyenne route. Yes, I feel sure that's best. When you appear before the Board tonight and report that the Laramie route is entirely unfeasible, I'm certain they'll see it your way."

Sam Sloan shook his head doggedly. "I dunno where in hell you picked up the idee I'm scared off. Me, I ain't quittin' the Laramie route. I'll put 'er through come hell or high water. You kin tell yore Board that."

Stranch looked at him wonderingly. "Have you thought about your wife . . . your child?"

"Mebby it's them I'm thinkin' about," Sam countered. "How d'yuh think Kitty'd feel if I backed down? What d'yuh think the kid'd feel if he growed up knowin' his pappy was a coward?"

Stranch shook his head in bewilderment. "Most unusual," he muttered. "Quite extraordinary."

Sam shrugged and got up from his seat on the corner of Stranch's desk. "You hired me tuh do a job, Mister, an' I aim tuh do it." He paused, then turned back to ask undecidedly, "You reckon that there Russian feller is plumb crazy?"

"He certainly acts insane," Stranch snapped. "Talking about starting his own Express route to Cheyenne! Why, he must have millions to throw away!"

"Crazy enough tuh murder a man in order to mebbly switch the route through Cheyenne so he'd get his lottery tickets faster?"

STRANCH looked at him excitedly. "By heavens! You may have hit on something. He did come in here suggesting that he expected the death of Hughes to change our minds about the route. Do you suppose he's the murderer?"

"I dunno, but I shore aim tuh find out," Sam grunted. "Lessee now, there was somethin' else I wanted tuh ask you. Oh, yes. Them fast hawses Hughes had lined up tuh buy in a bunch. You know anythin' about them?"

"Some commission house was expecting a herd to be shipped in from New Mexico, I think. Cross-bred Morgans."

"Feller named Edwin Kriger is the one he made thuh deal with from what it says in his papers," Sam muttered. "You know what commission house Kriger works for?"

"No. You can probably find out at the stockyards."

"Yeh. I reckon I kin. I figger on pickin' out fifty of them hawsea. What's thuh deal on payin' for 'em?"

"You pick out what you want," Stranch told him impatiently. "The company will okay payment. And I

hope you aren't making a mistake, Sloan."

"Why no. I reckon I ain't." Sam looked at him in surprise. "We're mighty lucky tuh pick up a bunch of hot-blooded hawses like that. They're scarcer'n hen's teeth in these parts."

"I don't mean about the horses. I refer to your decision to go on with the Laramie route in the face of the dangers that seem to threaten you."

"Why, no," said Sam mildly. "I don't reckon that's no mistake neither. I ain't never side-stepped trouble yet, an' I reckon I'm gettin' a mite too old tuh start it now."

"Very well," Stranch said. "It's your decision. I refuse to be responsible."

"Which nobody ain't askin' yuh to be," Sam retorted. He dropped his hand to the butt of his .45 and said softly, "Ol' Betsy, she'll be responsible fer me plenty, I reckon." He turned and shouldered his way through the door and out of the Pony Express office.

CHAPTER IX

SAM SLOAN jogged out toward the stockyards deep in thought about the interview that had just taken place in the Pony Express office. He tried to figure out the big, black-bearded man, but it was hard for Sam to believe he was a murderer. There was something so simple and childlike about him and his enthusiastic love for gambling. With a start, Sam realized that he sort of liked this strange Russian with the highly improbable name of Murphy. That was a bad start. He couldn't consider the matter impartially that way.

But he caught himself chuckling as he remembered the way the big man had declared that his only interests in life were gambling and drinking vodka.

"By golly," he muttered to himself. "I'll be doggoned if he don't sorta make me think of Ezra." That was it! He realized it at once as he thought about it more. That's why he liked the Russian. Because he was so much like his partner, one-eyed Ezra.

Ezra had the same simple-minded directness, the same trusting belief in other men that Murphy had demonstrated when he asked Stranch to change the mail route just so he could get his precious lottery tickets a little faster.

But Ezra certainly wasn't a murderer, and for that reason Sam couldn't quite bring himself to believe the Russian had murdered Hughes just to get the route changed. He would be a dangerous antagonist in an open fight, Sam considered, but he wasn't the kind to slip up in the night and kill an innocent victim.

His parting threat to open up an opposition mail route of his own just to get the tickets up to him on the road to Cheyenne was much more in keeping with his character, Sam thought. It was just the crazy kind of thing Ezra might do under the same circumstances if he had plenty of money to waste on a whim. He'd like to see those two together, Sam thought, with a broad grin. That would really be something worth sitting in on.

His thoughts reverted to Jim Stranch. Somehow he didn't quite understand the Pony Express executive. He'd sort of had that feeling from the first, but he'd squelched it because he didn't know much about businessmen and city ways. But from the beginning, he'd thought it was sort of funny that Stranch was going around hunting up a couple of supposedly meek family men to head the new route to Laramie. In fact, down at Dutch Springs he'd suspected maybe Stranch was pulling his leg about the reason he was being offered the job. He'd thought maybe that was just a cover-up to win Kitty over and get her consent to the assignment.

But he'd decided different after riding up to Denver on the train with Jim Stranch, and after finding out more about the man who was supposed to be his boss. Though Sam hadn't met Henry Hughes alive, it was easy to see that Hughes was a sort of easy-going fellow without any get-up and push. The run-down condition of his ranch showed that,

and the extreme poverty of his family.

No, Henry Hughes had been, quite clearly, exactly the type of man that Jim Stranch seemed to think he was getting when he hired Sam Sloan.

And Stranch's conduct in the office this afternoon clearly showed that he was in favor of abandoning the route. It sort of made you wonder if he hadn't hoped it would work out that way when he hired a man like Henry Hughes to head the route. As if maybe he'd selected Hughes and Sam Sloan for the top positions because he *hoped* they'd quit as soon as the going got tough.

That might explain his amazing proposal to Sam that they give it up now before it even got started. Sam hoped it did. He hated to think Stranch had set Hughes and him up as a pair of weak dummies to be knocked over by enemies of the route. That would make him practically guilty of Hughes' murder whether he had actually handled the rawhide riata that killed him or not.

It'd make him more guilty than the actual killer in Sam's opinion. It made him boiling angry to even think about it. It would constitute a direct betrayal of his company's best interests, and to Sam that was a lot worse crime than just plain murder.

He tried to quit worrying about it as he neared the stockyards. Thinking wasn't going to do any good. He needed some proof. But he had two suspects for Hughes' murder already. Both of them would bear watching and investigation. As soon as he learned who represented the Eastern financial interests that were developing new town-sites in Cheyenne, he'd have three suspects.

THE railroad track that he was following began to spread out and divide into innumerable spurs and sidings threading between wooden stock pens. Some of the pens held herds of cattle that had recently been shipped in for slaughter; and there were pens of bleating sheep and grunting hogs.

Sam turned his horse in among them, sitting erect and watching alertly for the herd of blooded horses

supposed to be in from New Mexico.

After a time he saw a pen of horses that looked promising, and he headed that way. As soon as he drew close he knew they must be the ones Hughes had made the deal for. There were about sixty of them milling around the railed enclosure, beautiful, clean-limbed animals who proved the hot blood in their veins by their leg action and arched necks.

Sam reined up outside the pen and nodded to two cowpokes hunched over on the top rail phlegmatically chewing their cud. "Right nice bunch of hawses," he told them.

They both turned their heads to look at him. They studied the horse he was riding and then looked back at the milling herd in the pen. One of them spat a stream of brown tobacco juice at a black stink-bug on the ground and admitted loftily, "Bunch of culls from the Molly Day ranch down in New Mexico, but I reckon they do look good to uh rannie from Colorado what never seen no Morgans."

Sam grinned cheerfully at the insult. He threw one leg over the saddle-horn and got out the makings. "Who's got 'em for sale?"

"Awready sold," the second rider informed him mournfully. "Snapped up like that soon's we unloaded 'em here." He snapped his fingers to indicate how fast the sale had been made.

Sam carefully fashioned a cigarette and lit it. "I reckon I know all aboot that deal. What commission house handled it?"

"Stevens an' Gregory. Feller name of Edwin Kriger, I reckon. You tuh buyer?"

"I reckon I'm gonna be if I kin locate Kriger."

"Find 'im up to tuh stockyard office, I reckon." One of the New Mexican riders jerked his thumb toward a low, sprawling frame building up ahead.

SAM nodded amiably and swung his leg down to the stirrup. He rode on to the office building and dismounted outside. A list of the commission firms was posted outside

the door, and he found Stevens and Gregory on the list. Opposite their names was the number of their office inside, 14.

Sam went in and down a long hallway, looking at the numbers on the doors as he passed. The door of number 14 stood ajar.

A long-necked, hard-faced female was pecking at a typewriter inside. She looked up in tight-lipped disapproval when Sam sauntered in without knocking. He dragged off his Stetson and asked, "Mr. Kriger in?"

"I'm afraid not. Who shall I say?"

"What?"

"Who is calling?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't hear nobody callin'."

She pursed her thin lips and demanded, "Who shall I tell Mr. Kriger wishes to see him?"

"How kin you tell him anythin' if he ain't in?" Sam asked.

"What makes you think he isn't in?"

"You said you was afraid he wasn't," Sam reminded her.

She smiled coldly. "I meant that I'm afraid he may not be in to you."

Sam shook his head in perplexity. City folks sure did have funny ways. Seemed like they just couldn't say yes or no when a man asked a simple question.

He said, "Tell 'im it's Sam Sloan."

"What's the nature of your business, Mr. Sloan?"

"Them blooded hawses from the Molly Day ranch in New Mexico."

The hard-faced woman shook her head. "They're already sold."

"Shore they are," Sam said angrily. "Tuh the Pony Express company. Tell him I'm here tuh pick out my fifty head for tuh Laramie route."

She tightened her lips disapprovingly and told him, "I'm quite sure you're mistaken."

She got up and went through a door behind her desk, closed it firmly behind her. Sam shifted his weight from one foot to the other while he waited. He didn't see how city folks ever got anything accomplished with all this dilly-dallying about even getting to talk to a man about business.

She came back through the door

and again carefully closed it behind her. She shook her head and told Sam Sloan:

"It's just as I thought at first. Mr. Kriger isn't in."

"Then who in hell d'yuh talk to back yonder?" Sam demanded.

"Why, to Mr. Kriger. And it isn't necessary for you to swear at me, is it?"

"Scuse me, ma'am," Sam mumbled. "But how could you talk tuh Kriger if he ain't in?"

She shook her head to indicate that his lack of perception was maddening. "He isn't in to you." She sat down and adjusted a sheet of paper in her machine and began typing furiously.

Sam settled his hat firmly back on his head. He walked past her to the door and grabbed hold of the knob. She whirled around and squealed, "Oh no! You mustn't . . ."

SAM jerked the door open and walked into a big square office with a pleasant rug on the floor and afternoon sunlight coming in the windows. The sunlight glanced off a big diamond ring on the hand of the man sitting behind a flat oak desk. He was tall, and had iron-gray hair and a bony face. He looked up with an expression of annoyance and said, "Yes, yes. What is it?"

Sam walked across the thick rug until his thighs pressed against the edge of the oaken desk. "Are you Kriger?"

"Why, yes."

"I'm Sam Sloan. The feller that dish-faced female out yonder says you ain't in to."

The bony face behind the desk hardened. "Why do you come bursting into a private office where you're not welcome?"

"You don't even know who I am," Sam protested. "It's about them Morgan hawses from the Molly Day ranch."

"Precisely why I have no interest in seeing you," snapped the commission merchant irritably. "That herd is sold."

"Shore. But damn it! Lissen tuh me." Sam slammed his fist down on

the desk. "I know you sold Henry Hughes his pick of that bunch. I'm talkin' fer him. Hughes is dead an' I'm takin' over the Pony Express route tuh Laramie. D'yuh understand that or is yore head too danged thick tuh get it?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about." Mr. Edwin Kriger was beginning to look alarmed by Sam's vehemence.

Sam Sloan sighed deeply. "I reckon straight talk is somethin' you city folks ain't never learned. I'll go it easy. You know Henry Hughes?"

"Seems to me I recall the name," Kriger admitted cautiously. He furrowed his forehead in thought. "Representing the Pony Express, eh? I believe he did talk to me about buying some horses."

"You know dang well he did! You made him uh price on fifty head of the Molly Day herd, an' I'm here tuh pick them fifty head out right now."

"But you're too late, Mr. Sloan. The horses are sold to another party. Don't you understand plain English?"

"What kinda double-cross is that?" Sam demanded angrily. "You had uh deal with Hughes. It's all writ down here in his papers." He reached in his hip pocket for the documents Mrs. Hughes had turned over to him.

"I remember an oral discussion. But there was nothing binding. Nothing in writing."

"Don't yore promises mean nothin'?"

"But my dear fellow, we can't conduct a business on the basis of verbal agreements. I had only Mr. Hughes' word that he would take the horses. How did I know he wouldn't back out and leave me holding the sack?"

"Because that's jest what you'd do if you felt like it, huh?"

Kriger spread out his hands blandly. "There was no written agreement. As commission merchants, it is our duty to get the best price we can for our clients who intrust stock to us. We certainly could not ethically turn down a much larger offer."

Sam didn't get all of that, but he guessed it meant that Kriger had sold the herd out from under him to a higher bidder.

"Yuh mean tuh say you sold 'em to somebody else . . . after you'd promised Hughes his pick of fifty?"

"At a much higher price than Hughes was prepared to pay," Kriger told him smugly. "You must remember that we must always protect our clients' best interests. We realized a neat profit for our clients by accepting the larger offer."

"An' it was plumb crooked," Sam told him angrily. "Them hawses was spoke for."

"I'm sorry that I can't see it your way." Edwin Kriger waved his ringed hand decisively. "I'm a very busy man, Mr. Sloan, and . . ."

"Who'd yuh sell 'em to?" Sam demanded.

"I'm sorry. The buyer requested that his name be withheld."

"Thuh hell he did! Who'd want sixty Morgan hawses in one bunch? What'd he figger on doin' with 'em?"

"I'm sure I don't know. It wasn't up to me to pry into his reasons for buying."

YOU know damn well there's only one reason anybody'd have for doin' that," Sam protested. "Somebody that knowed we needed 'em for the Laramie route an' that don't want us tuh start that route. Who was it?"

"That is something I cannot divulge," Kriger told him coldly. "Really, this discussion is most fantastic. This is a business office, Mr. Sloan."

"Monkey bizness," Sam grated. He slowly drew his .45 from its holster. "Mebby this'll persuade you tuh tell me who bought them hawses."

Mr. Kriger paled and threw up his hands as though they could ward off a bullet. "But this is preposterous. You can't possibly be serious."

"Do I look like I'm funnin'?" Sam asked with a dark scowl. He held the gun loosely at his hip and the big muzzle pointed directly at Kriger's mid-section. "Ol' Betsy's loaded with soft-nosed bullets," he said

grimly, "an' they'll make a hell of a mess when that fat paunch uh yores is scattered all over this fancy rug. I'm countin' three before I start triggerin'."

He paused a second and said, "One . . . two . . ."

"No," Edwin Kriger cried out, "For heaven's sake, put that gun away." He opened a drawer of the desk and scrabbled frantically among some papers in it. "I have his name right here some place. Yes. Here it is. Leland Pepper. And that's all I know about him. I swear it is. He paid cash in full and accepted delivery here."

Sam holstered his gun with a grunt of disgust. "What's this here Leland Pepper look like?"

"I don't know. That is . . . I didn't notice particularly. Medium height and weight. Quite well-dressed. An Easterner, I imagine, judging by his dress and his pronunciation."

"His what?" Sam scowled.

"His manner of pronouncing certain words."

"How kin yuh tell that makes him a Easterner?" Sam demanded.

Edwin Kriger laughed at such stupidity. With Sam's gun safely back in its holster, he felt much better. "Anyone with an ounce of perspicacity can tell an Easterner by the way he pronounces certain words. And that's really all I can tell you about him, Mr. Sloan."

Sam said, "Next time you see Mr. Leland Pepper tell him I'm honin' fer a talk with him." He turned and stalked out, the name of Leland Pepper striking a familiar note in his memory. Yes; that was the man the crazy Russian had been asking about in Stranch's office.

To hell with it, Sam thought. For his own business with Pepper was far more important. . . .

CHAPTER X

SAM SLOAN spent the next two days in the saddle looking for horses good enough to buy for the Express route. It was a disheartening business. There were plenty

of fine cow-horses on the ranches throughout Colorado, but few of them met the company's exacting specifications. Because a cow-horse is essentially a work-horse, and thoroughbred stock is generally too high-spirited to do the day-by-day routine required of a horse on a cattle ranch.

Speed isn't essential in a cow-horse. It doesn't take thoroughbred blood to outrace a lumbering bull or heifer; and stamina and surefootedness are much more important.

For the Pony Express route, speed was all important. The riders were limited to a maximum weight of one hundred and thirty-five pounds, and their saddles were stripped of all unnecessary gear, with the two mail pouches limited to ten pounds each to get the maximum speed from each horse. Covering only one ten-mile leg of the route each day, the horses were carefully selected for those particular requirements, and the run-of-the-mill range horses simply didn't fill the bill.

At the end of two days, Sam had located only twenty head of horses that he thought would do, and he was dead-tired and thoroughly disgusted with city commission men who couldn't be trusted to carry out their end of a bargain. He was completing a wide swing that had taken him to all the biggest ranches around that section, and as dusk of the second day came on he found himself nearing the Hughes ranch.

He hadn't planned it that way consciously, but his heart beat a little faster with anticipation as he neared the ranch. According to his best calculations, it was just possible that Kitty might have arrived from Denver that day.

He had sent the letter down to her at the Lazy Mare ranch by Pony Express, and if she'd caught the train at Hopewell Junction the next day and come right up to Denver, she could have reached the city the preceding night.

It sure was funny how much he missed Kitty and the little one. He'd always thought it was silly the way some married men were always wanting to get back to their wives, but

now he realized it wasn't funny at all. He just felt like sort of half a man without Kitty around, and he worried a lot about his young son, too. Suppose Sammy was to forget his dad after being away from him so long? Suppose he was to get to like Ezra best? Because he knew Ezra would be spending every minute making up to him. And kids did like big, good-natured Ezra. He had a way with them. It was because he was sort of simple-minded like a child himself, Sam thought, but he didn't like the idea of Ezra horning in on little Sammy's affections. He had good reason to spur his tired horse up and peer anxiously ahead through the dusk as he approached the Hughes ranch.

His heart got tight in his chest and started thumping loudly when he saw a strange surrey with a fringed top standing in the yard. It was painted red, with yellow wheel-spokes, and the paint glistened brightly even though overlaid with a coat of road dust. He knew from the bright paint that it must be hired from a livery stable, and that was proof that Kitty and little Sammy must be waiting for him inside the brightly lighted ranch house.

He checked his horse to a slow trot as soon as he saw the surrey, and tried to assume an appearance of complete disinterest. If Ezra had come with her, it never would do to let him know he had missed his wife so much.

He pretended he didn't notice the surrey, and rode on up to the corral whistling nonchalantly. He took his time about unsaddling and feeding his horse, and then strolled up to the door as if he didn't know or didn't care that his wife was inside.

He stopped on the porch and knocked loudly.

VERA HUGHES opened the door at once. She peered out at him, and then beamed a welcoming smile. "It's Mr. Sloan. We were just saying . . ."

She was interrupted by a delighted shriek from Kitty. She jumped up from a chair and flung herself into

his arms, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

Sam was greatly embarrassed by this display of naked emotion right in front of a roomful of people. Seemed to him like he'd never seen so many people all in one room at once, for the five Hughes girls were lined up against the wall in straight chairs, and all of them were looking right at Kitty and him with big, wondering eyes.

That was bad enough, but then he saw Ezra sitting across the room sprawled out in an easy chair like he owned the place, and Ezra was laughing like it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen in his life.

Sam was powerful glad to see Kitty, and he never had felt anything as good as her warm arms around his neck, but he blushed a deep scarlet when he saw all those people watching him, and he pushed Kitty away gently.

"Made it up here awright, huh?" he asked gruffly. "It's a wonder yuh did with that one-eyed galoot ridin' herd on yuh." He scowled affectionately across the room at Ezra, and then looked around with a troubled frown. "Where-at's Sammy?"

"Taking a nap as all good babies should as soon as it gets dark," Kitty told him proudly. She caught his arm and squeezed it surreptitiously and whispered, "He missed you terribly. Just wouldn't make up to Ezra at all."

Sam grinned fondly at this report. Then the five little girls were standing up solemnly in a straight row in front of him, and each of their heads bobbed as Mrs. Hughes pronounced their names:

"Miranda — Jennifer — Agatha — Samantha — Eunice, this is Mr. Sam Sloan. He was to be your father's assistant until, until . . ." Her voice broke into a sob.

"We know, Mama," Miranda said solemnly. "I saw you here that night, Mr. Sloan. Mama said you were awful good to Papa, and we all thank you."

"Tweren't nothin'," Sam protested gruffly, and got out his bandanna to blow his nose.

Ezra got up and ambled forward, slapped him resoundingly on the back and rumbled, "From what I hear I reckon it's time Kitty an' me wuz gettin' up here tuh take keer of you."

Almost felled by the good-natured blow, Sam stumbled forward and caught the back of a chair to steady himself. "Shore good of yuh," he muttered. "Time you was gettin' started back, ain't it?"

"I'm stayin' tuh he'p you put thuh route through," Ezra announced happily. "Kitty worries 'bout you somethin' turrible when I ain't around tuh see yo're awright."

"I'll worry a lot more with you two together," Kitty put in spiritedly. "Sally Stevens warned me how you two are about going out to look for trouble if it doesn't come to you."

"Which we don't have tuh do this time," Sam informed her. "Trouble comes right up on this job an' slaps a man in thuh face."

"I've kept some supper hot," Mrs. Hughes said quickly. "If you'll just sit down, Mr. Sloan, I'll bring it in to you here."

"That's mighty kind, Ma'am," Sam muttered. "I ain't et since early this morning."

"And perhaps we can listen to the children play while you're eating," Kitty said. She hurried over and sat close to Sam on the sofa.

"Lissen to 'em play?" Sam repeated with a frown. "I thought you gen'r'ly watched kids play."

"Play music," Kitty explained. "They're wonderful musicians, Sam. Each one has her own instrument."

"Perhaps Mr. Sloan doesn't care for music," Vera smiled as she came in from the kitchen with a steaming plate of food which she set on a low table in front of Sam.

"Oh, but he loves music," Kitty assured Vera, though she well knew her husband's love of music had begun and ended with the songs she used to sing in Dutch Springs before they were married.

"Shore do," Sam mumbled. "I'd be mighty proud tuh hear 'em play a piece."

Vera said, "Very well then, girls. You may play one piece for Mr. Sloan

and then you must hurry off to bed because I'm sure he has a lot of things to discuss with his wife and Mr. Ezra."

Now there, Sam thought appreciatively, was a real understanding woman. One piece wouldn't be so bad, especially while he was eating and couldn't talk anyway.

THE five little girls obediently gathered up their instruments and seated themselves in a circle around Eunice at the old melodeon. They played a simple old hymn, and Sam found to his surprise that it wasn't bad at all. Seemed like it made his supper taste better, and he nodded emphatic approval and said, "Mighty purty," when they finished.

"The instruments are worn and need to be fixed up," Mrs. Hughes sighed. "We'd hoped that . . . with Henry having the new job . . ." She stopped and tears filled her eyes, and Sam put in loudly:

"Which reminds me of that there what we was talkin' 'bout the other day, Miz Hughes. I checked up in tuh Denver office an' 'twas jest like I thought. There's some insurance money that'll be comin' later on. I dunno jest how much, but a purty good sum, I reckon."

"Thank the Lord for that," Mrs. Hughes sighed. "I *knew* that Mr. Stranch was a kind man as soon as I met him."

Sam muttered, "Yes'm, he shore is." He felt guilty about not talking it over with Kitty before he raised Mrs. Hughes' hopes about getting some money, but then he knew Kitty would approve the plan. You could tell by the way she looked at the little girls how sorry she was.

"How're things goin' on tuh new route?" Ezra asked loudly. "Anybody else bin kilt yet?"

There was a shocked silence in the room. The little girls, who were putting away their instruments, looked at each other and then at their mother.

Ezra was instantly covered with confusion. "I didn't mean tuh say that," he groaned. "It sorta slipped out like. I shore didn't mean . . ."

"That's all right," Mrs. Hughes told him. "The children and I have to get used to the fact that Henry has gone. But I think you'd all better run along to bed," she added gently to the children. "It's getting late."

None of the others said anything until the five little girls had filed past their mother, kissing her good night and shyly telling the guests good night also.

After they were out of the room, Sam answered Ezra's question: "Nope. Nothin' quite that bad has happened yet, but I'm runnin' into plenty more trouble. You recollect the deal yore husband had fixed up for them fast hawses in Denver?" he added to Vera.

"Yes. He was to get fifty head from a commission firm that had a shipment coming in from New Mexico. Henry was very pleased with the deal. He told me it would take weeks to round up enough good horses from around the state otherwise."

"He was plumb right," Sam groaned. "Thass what I've bin tryin' tuh do. Found twenty head in two days," he told Ezra disgustedly.

"What happened to tuh fifty head?"

"Oh, yeh. I was goin' tuh tell you about that. 'Fore I got around tuh pickin' 'em out they was already sold to uh higher bidder. The hull bunch uh sixty head. Some feller paid a lot more'n Hughes had offered."

"Sixty head of Morgan thoroughbreds?" Ezra exclaimed. "Who'd buy a herd like that? Who'd want 'em?"

"Thass what I'm wonderin'. My guess is 'twas somebody tryin' to block the Laramie route."

"But I thought you said fifty of them had already been promised to Mr. Hughes," Kitty put in. "How could he sell them to someone else?"

"'Cause he's a dirty, low-down, double-crossin' . . ."

"Sam!" Kitty stopped him quickly.

"Well, damn it, Kitty, he is!" Sam exploded.

"Of course he is." She squeezed his hand.

"Shore looks like somebody is bound there ain't gonna be no Pony

mail route up through Laramie," Ezra boomed out cheerfully.

"Now, Ezra," said Kitty. "Don't start looking for trouble where there may not be any."

"Ain't none?" Ezra asked in surprise. "Looks tuh me like there ain't bin nothin' but trouble on thuh route this far. 'Course, that's what I looked fer with Sam tryin' tuh run the job by himself. With me here tuh he'p out we'll git 'er runnin'!"

"Who was it that bought the horses out from under you?" Vera Hughes asked Sam in a troubled voice.

"I dunno rightly. No more'n his name. An' the Kriger feller reckons he's from thuh East account of how funny he talks."

"How funny he talks?" Vera repeated in a startled voice. She sat bolt upright and stared at him. "How do you mean?"

"I dunno rightly. Thuh way he pronounces words, I reckon."

"Do you mean like . . . like saying v's for w's?"

SAM looked puzzled and started to shake his head, and then he laughed loudly. "Darned if it don't sound like you was talkin' 'bout thuh same crazy feller I run into in thuh Express office in Denver."

"Crazy?" Vera asked in a small voice.

"Plumb loco, awright. He's one of these here Russians that's crazy 'bout drinking vodka." Sam chuckled at the memory. "He makes the stuff outa potatoes up near Cheyenne and gambles on the Mexican lotteries, an' dogged if he don't want thuh route tuh run by Cheyenne where he lives jest so he kin get his lottery tickets quicker. He was in Stranch's office arguin' 'bout it. Seemed like he hoped Mr. Hughes bein' killed would scare us off the Laramie route."

Ezra and Kitty both laughed with him at the crazy idea of a foreigner wanting a route run by Cheyenne just to do his gambling swiftly. But Vera Hughes didn't laugh. Her face was white and tense. She gripped the arms of her chair and leaned forward to ask, "Did he have a long black beard and dress queerly?"

"He shore did. Say, has he bin around here botherin' you?"

"Yes," Vera said in a choked voice.

"He came the day after . . . after Henry was killed. He talked wild and crazy about hoping I didn't believe the bad things people were saying about him, though I didn't know what he was talking about. And he had a couple of goatskin bags that he said were full of potato cider and I thought it would be all right to humor him by drinking a glass with him."

She paused and shuddered at the memory. "I'm terribly ashamed to tell about it, but I drank some of the stuff before I knew it was vodka. It's the first intoxicating drink I ever tasted and it went to my head," she confessed.

"I was going to kill a chicken for dinner and he went to his horse and took down a coiled whip. A long, leather whip. As long as a lariat. He called it his friend and boasted he could kill anything with it."

"A whip?" Sam exclaimed. "Braided leather, huh? By golly, I wonder . . ."

"I know what you're thinking," Vera told him steadily. "About those marks on Henry's neck. Let me finish. He knew how to handle the whip, all right. I pointed out a fat hen thirty feet away and with one little flick of his wrist, that horrible whip snaked out and jerked the hen's head off."

"By golly, that settles it." Sam started to get up.

"Wait," Vera implored him. "You haven't heard it all yet. Not the worst part. As soon as the chicken was dead he lifted the whip and popped it over his head three times. Exactly like the three queer pops I heard after Henry was murdered. And then he boasted to me that he always popped his whip three times like that when he killed anything. That it was the custom of his own family in Russia, I think he said—a sort of sign—that his family did the killing . . ." She shuddered, her face pale.

"What'd you do?" Sam demanded.

"I think I went out of my mind for

a moment when I realized where I had heard those three pops before. I ran into the house to get Henry's rifle. But he got away while I was loading it. And afterward . . . I just didn't know. I thought maybe I'd dreamed it. He seemed like such a nice and gentle man—except when . . ." She let her voice drag into silence. Then: "Did you ever hear of a man named Big-Foot McCann?"

SAM scratched his head, squinting at the ceiling. "Does sound a mite familiar," he muttered. "Oh, yes; now I got it. Used to run a freighter outfit, down in New Mexico. Went bust when another bunch started cutting rates on him. Word was that he shot himself . . ."

She nodded eagerly. "Or a man named Pe—" Then her lips clamped shut. "Oh, dear," she whispered, half to herself. "I gave my word I wouldn't say anything. And after all, maybe that wasn't his whip that made those three pops . . ." She looked at Sam, wide-eyed. "We—we shouldn't judge anyone guilty before they've been tried, should we? And—and I really liked the man."

"I liked him, too," Sam admitted angrily. "And we'll try him plenty pronto when we get him. Judge Sam Colt or Judge Lynch will preside on his case, all right!" Sam turned to Ezra. "He reminded me of you, Ezra."

"Me, huh? I take that as a personal insult." Ezra leaped to his feet angrily. "You know I ain't never went around popping a whip an' killin' people."

"Of course," Sam said slowly to Vera, "we ain't got no def'nite proof that 'twas him."

"Good heavens," said Kitty angrily. "What more do you want for proof? He admits he wants the route to go through Cheyenne so he can get his precious tickets faster. And you've already said you think Mr. Hughes was killed by someone trying to block the Laramie route. Are you just going to sit here and let that bearded brute go around making orphans out of all the children in Colorado?"

Sam grinned at her and got up. "Since yuh feel that way about it," he began, but was interrupted by the sound of a horse galloping up to the door. A man flung himself off and pounded on the door thunderously.

Sam reached it in two strides and jerked it open.

Wack Beadle's voice shouted excitedly, "Sam Sloan in here?" Then he saw Sam, and gasped out, "I was lookin' fer you. More trouble up thuh line."

"What sorta trouble?"

"Yuh know that rider yuh sent up from Lefty's Crossin' tuh look over that leg of thuh route he's hired tuh ride . . ." He paused to get his breath.

"Yeh. Larry Conover," said Sam impatiently. "What about him?"

"He's dead!" Wack ejaculated. "I rode down with him toward Lefty's Crossin' an' 'twas jest gettin' dark when I turned back. I hadn't rode more'n two hundred yards when I heerd a awful yell from back where he was. I turned 'round an' headed for him an' then I heerd three funny pops-like, an' another hawse ridin' off hell-bent to'rds Cheyenne."

"Three pops?" Sam exclaimed. "Like from a whip mebb'y?"

"Yeh. Yeh, by golly, I reckon that's what done it. Well, sir, I found the pore feller layin' by the side of thuh trail, an' . . ."

"I know," said Sam grimly. "His neck was clean broke."

"That's right." Wack looked surprised. "How'd you . . .?"

"An' there's marks 'round his neck like rope burns," Sam went on angrily. "Only they ain't rope burns. They was made by braided leather . . . like a rawhide riata . . . or a long whip."

"Yessir. That's plumb keerect. But I shore dunno . . ."

Sam whirled around toward Ezra. "Kin you ride one of them livery hawses you drove up from Denver?"

"I'd fork uh streak of lightnin' tuh take out after that there hell-hound," Ezra declared angrily.

"I'll give Ezra Mr. Hughes' saddle," Sam told Vera Hughes. "We'll trail him all thuh way to his hide-

out in tuh woods on tuh Cheyenne road if we got to."

Kitty ran to him with a little cry and threw her arms about his neck. He turned her chin up and kissed her soft lips with lingering tenderness, and then told Ezra and Wack gruffly, "Le's get goin'," and the three men strode away grimly.

CHAPTER XI

"**H**OW far from here is Conover layin'?" Sam asked as Wack Beadle stopped beside his saddled horse in the yard. "Six or seven miles. I stopped by our shack on tuh way an' told Hank tuh ride back an' wait with him till we come."

"You might's well get started back while we saddle up," Sam told him. "You or Hank stay with Conover till we get there. T'other one kin start trailin' the Russian."

Wack swung into the saddle and spurred his horse away through the early darkness. Sam and Ezra trotted on to the corral, and Sam suggested, "Mebby we both better saddle up them liv'ry hawses. My roan's plumb tuckered out, an' none of Hughes' hawses look like they'd stand up under a long ride."

"I dunno how tuh liv'ry team will take tuh saddles," Ezra warned him, "but they're purty good hawses. An' I drove 'em tuh twenty miles from Denver easy tuhday so they ain't too tired."

Sam went into the saddle-shed and handed out a coiled catch-rope to Ezra. He got his own lariat from his saddle and joined his partner in the corral a minute later. Ezra was swearing hoarsely at half a dozen horses circling around him, vainly trying to pick out the livery team in the darkness.

"They're both bays," he muttered to Sam. "One of 'em has got a glazed face an' t'other has got two white feet."

"That ort tuh be one of 'em!" Sam spread a large loop over the head of a circling horse and jerked it tight. He walked the rope up to his catch and announced, "I got tuh blaze-

face. If you kin pick out t'other one . . ."

"Got him," Ezra shouted behind him. "'Less'n one of Hughes' nags has got two white stockin's too."

Sam was leading his bay to the gate. "I don't recollect no white-footed bays," he called back over his shoulder.

"Then we got 'em both." Ezra joined him at the gate. They led the team of bays out and closed the gate behind them.

The horses cringed but stood still when they threw blankets on them and adjusted heavy stock saddles.

"Broke tuh ride awright," Ezra muttered. "But they're trottin' hawses, Sam. Shore will be tough on a long trail."

"They're the only fresh stock here," Sam reminded him. "I reckon we kin stand a little bouncin' tuh ketch up with that damned whip-murderer."

They swung into their saddles simultaneously and wheeled the horses out of the yard. Both bays broke into a fast, racking trot, true to their livery training. It was a fast pace, but it bounced their riders unmercifully for western riders are accustomed to ride solid in the saddle at a gentle jog-trot or an easy lope instead of posting up and down at a fast trot as Eastern riders are taught to do.

And the livery horses practically refused to break into a gallop. Having been trained in harness, they had been discouraged from galloping from colthood, and when spurred by their riders they simply stretched their legs and trotted faster.

They hadn't ridden more than two miles when they heard a rider galloping up the road toward them. They kept on at the same fast trot, not wanting to waste any time stopping along the road, but the approaching rider reined up and shouted loudly at them, "Sloan? Sam Sloan!"

SAM didn't recognize the voice, but he pulled his horse up and shouted, "Yeh. I'm Sloan. Whatcha want?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Who tuh hell are yuh?" Sam demanded angrily.

"Stranch, damn it!" The rider

pulled up close to him and Sam now recognized the Pony Express executive.

"What're yuh doin' out here? I ain't got time tuh talk now."

"You've got time to talk to me," Stranch grated. "Do you know what I ran into down the road?"

"I reckon I do. Thass why I ain't got no time tuh stop an' make talk. We're ridin' after the killer right now."

"Hank Slater and Wack Beadle are both down there," Stranch told him impatiently. "And this man with you can go on, too. You're not hired to ride off half-cocked after killers, Sloan."

"Are you orderin' me tuh stay here?" Sam demanded.

"I am," Stranch told him coldly, "if you want it that way."

"This here's my boss," Sam muttered by way of explanation to Ezra. "S'pose you ride on an' I'll foller soon's I kin get rid of him."

"Fust time I ever seen you take orders," Ezra grunted. "Awright, I'll settle black-beard's hash my ownse'f." He spurred his horse up into a fast trot again and quickly vanished in the darkness.

Sam swung out of the saddle and squatted down on his heels in the road. "So yuh know what happened tuh Larry Conover?" he muttered.

"I do, Sloan. And I don't like it at all."

"I don't reckon Conover likes it much neither."

"But why are you riding off helter-skelter?" Stranch demanded.

"I aim tuh trail that murderer down."

"Why? Trailing down a murderer isn't your business, Sloan. You're being paid a salary to run a Pony Express route to Laramie, though it doesn't look to me that you've done much to earn your salary as yet."

"If you don't like thuh way I'm doin'," Sam said flatly, "I'm quittin' right here an' now."

"Don't get on your high horse," Jim Stranch said hastily. "Good heavens, haven't I enough trouble without you running out on me?"

"But yuh said . . ."

"I'm trying to convince you that you won't be earning your salary by dashing around in the night looking for murderers. Conover is dead. He's of no further use to us on the route, and hunting down his murderer is a job for the law."

"Seems like tuh me," said Sam softly, "that yo're sorta worried 'bout thuh killer gettin' caught. What're you doin' out here tuhnight anyhow?"

"I've been up the road trying to locate horses for you to use on the route since you messed up the deal with the Denver commission house," Stranch told him harshly. "It's absolutely unreasonable of you to intimate I don't want the killer caught, just because I feel it's a job for the duly constituted authorities."

"They ain't done nothin' yet about thuh man that murdered Henry Hughes," Sam reminded him grimly.

"All that has nothing to do with you. Good heavens, man, I selected you for this job because I believed you were steady and reliable!"

"Want me tuh get the route started, don't cha?" Sam asked with dangerous calm.

"Of course, but . . ."

"Then ketchin' thuh murderer is a 'portant part of my job," Sam argued. "Thuh same man killed Hughes an' Conover both . . . an' I know *who he is*. I'm wastin' time here talkin' to yuh."

"What makes you think they were killed by the same man?"

"Did yuh stop tuh look at Conover?" demanded Sam.

"Yes. Not too closely, I confess."

"His neck is broke. Jest like Hughes'. It's got burns around it from a braided leather rope or whip. Jest like Hughes' neck had. An' thuh killer made thuh same three pops when he rode away. Can't yuh see what's plain as thuh nose on yore face? Fust Hughes, an' then one of my riders. I'll *never* get thuh route started if my riders are gonna get killed off one by one."

"Perhaps it was just coincidence that both of them were Pony Express men. My theory is that both died as a result of private quarrels."

"What about thuh widder Hughes'?"

chicken gettin' its neck broke?" Sam demanded. "An' thuh three pops she heard then?"

"What about the widow's chicken? I don't quite follow you."

SAM had forgotten that Stranch wasn't aware of the latest evidence against the strange Russian who called himself Murphy. He didn't want to waste time going through a laborious explanation, so he merely said, "I've got the dead-wood on that Russian, an' I'm gonna trail him to his hide-out an' kill him before he gets any more of my men."

"Russian? You mean . . . ?"

"The feller that was in yore office t'other day trying tuh get us tuh change the route to Cheyenne so he could do his gamblin' faster."

"But that's preposterous," Stranch said weakly. "Surely he wouldn't commit murder for such a trifling motive."

"Tain't triflin' tuh him. Remember how he rolled his eyes in yore office? Shore, he's crazy. Thass why I'm goin' after him."

"Even if your reasoning is correct, it isn't your duty to arrest him."

"I ain't studyin' 'bout arrestin' him," Sam growled. "Any time I meet up with a plumb low-down murderin' coyote like him there ain't likely tuh be much left fer tuh law tuh worry about when I get through."

"Our company doesn't countenance that sort of lawlessness," Stranch warned him sharply. "Every man deserves a fair trial. I'm amazed and disappointed by your attitude, Sloan. It's exactly this sort of thing I sought to avoid when I selected you for this position. In fact, I forbid you to go off chasing some fellow whom you rashly suspect of murder."

"Want me tuh let 'im get plumb away, huh?"

"Turn whatever evidence you have accumulated over to the officers of the law," Stranch argued. "Personally, I can't believe that strange Russian is guilty. At least he deserves a fair trial."

"If these murders are a plot against us to block the Laramie

route, I hardly believe one crazy man has planned it all single-handed. No, Sloan. It's evidently much bigger than that. Much too big for us to buck, it seems to me. I think we'll have to give the route up," he ended decisively.

"Let that Russian get away with it?"

"I tell you I don't believe it's the Russian." Stranch pounded his saddle-horn impatiently. "And we're not getting anywhere this way. You haven't accomplished one thing toward getting the route started. Our other riders will become panic-stricken and quit when word of the murders gets around. You have no decent horses as yet."

"I located 'bout twenty in thuh past two days," Sam grunted.

"But you're being blocked at every turn," protested Stranch. "Can't you see we're up against something too big to fight? Take that horse deal in Denver. The opposition had some means of discovering our plans to buy that New Mexico herd, and they had the money to get in and outbid us. That argues a large and powerful organization."

"I bin thinkin' some about that," Sam admitted. "I wonder how anybody found out about thuh deal Hughes had made with Kriger."

"I'm sure I don't know. Only a few trusted employees in my office knew about it."

THAT'S what I was thinkin'," Sam drawled. He stood up and glared up at the company executive seated in the saddle. "I bin thinkin' a lot of funny things about you. How yuh didn't want this route tuh Laramie in thuh fust place, an' how yuh tried tuh pick out a couple of fellers tuh run it that you thought would scare easy. You wouldn't be playin' both ends against thuh middle, would yuh?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Thuh hell yuh don't. I mean I'm wonderin' if you've mebbey got a interest in them town-sites over in Cheyenne . . . if it'd be wuth money

to you tuh have the route go that way."

"Do you know what you're sayin'?" Stranch panted.

"I gen'rally do. Seems tuh me like you're too doggoned eager tuh give up thuh Laramie route. Right now you're wastin' my time here arguin', when I ort tuh be ridin' after thuh murderer. Which I'm gonna keep on doin'."

Sam grabbed up his reins and painfully prepared to mount.

"What do you plan to do?" Stranch asked angrily.

"What I orta bin doin' all this time. I'm runnin' down thuh skunk that killed Hughes an' Conover." Sam winced as he settled himself back.

"I forbid it," said Stranch coldly.

"An' you kin go plumb tuh hell," Sam retorted. He reined his horse around, and started following Ezra.

"You're fired," Stranch shouted after him. "Do you hear me? You're fired here and now, Sloan. I won't countenance . . ."

Sam turned in the saddle and yelled back, "You ain't firin' me, Mister. I done quit half an hour ago." Then he spurred on down the trail.

Sam didn't hear the fulminations behind him. He kept on riding. He didn't give a damn about the job any more. This had become a personal matter with him and he wouldn't quit the trail until he had come to grips with the murderer.

CHAPTER XII

LEAVING Sam behind to talk with Stranch, Ezra bounced along the road unhappily on the back of the fast-trotting livery stable horse from Denver. He didn't blame Sam much for taking the opportunity to get off and take a rest from the jolting. If it kept up very long, Ezra knew it would soon become real agony, but he pushed on as fast as he could because it was up to him now. The murderer had already had too much time to get away, and it was pretty dark to start trailing him.

After a time he saw pin-points of light in the distance, and knew they must be cigarettes in the mouths of

the two riders waiting by the dead man. He was surprised to see them so soon for it sure didn't seem like to him that he'd rode six or seven miles, and he grudgingly changed his opinion of the trotting horse under his saddle. He was rough riding, but Ezra had to admit his gait covered a lot of ground swiftly.

He reined up as he approached the two glowing cigarettes, and saw two men squatting side by side in the road with their horses ground-tied behind them. They stood up and the shortest one asked gruffly, "Who's there?"

"It's me. Ezra." He gingerly slid out of the saddle and sighed with relief as he stood upright.

"Oh. That one-eyed feller, huh?" Wack Beadle said. "Where-at's Sam Sloan?"

"I left him back thuh road a piece. Boss stopped him fer uh pow-wow an' I come on."

"Oh. Jim Stranch?" Wack said. "Yeh. I met him back a ways. This here's my pardner, Hank Slater. I never did ketch yore name," he added to Ezra.

"I'm Ezra. Sam's pardner from Powder Valley." Ezra stuck out a huge hand toward the tall man. "Where's thuh body?"

"Right yonder." Wack led the way to the side of the road and knelt in the dust to strike a match. Ezra leaned down and peered curiously at the marks burned into the broken neck of the dead man. "Looks like we was right," he muttered. "That's thuh sorta job a whip'd do if it was handled right."

"I'd shore admire tuh know what Sam Sloan was talking about back yonder at thuh Hughes house," Wack ejaculated. "How-come he knowed so danged much about how this yere job was did?"

"On account of we know who did it," Ezra told him proudly. "Same feller that kilt Hughes."

"By golly, that's right, Wack," Hank Slater spoke up excitedly. "Don't yuh recollect Sam tellin' us how his neck was broke by a rawhide riata. Jest like this 'un."

"Only. 'tweren't a rawhide riata," Ezra corrected him sourly. "'Twas a long leather whip that busted both

their necks. Black-bearded foreign feller what wants tuhuh route tuh go tuh Cheyenne 'stead of Laramie so's he kin gamble on tuhuh lotteries. I don't blame him none fer that," Ezra went on judicially, "but he hadn't orta kill fellers jest tuh do it."

"That Russian," Hank cried out, slapping his thigh. "I ain't none s'prised."

"You seen him round here?" Ezra demanded.

"He wuz aroun' this afternoon. Claimed he'd los' his way an' wanted tuh make it back to'rds Cheyenne near's I cud make out what he said."

"That's tuhuh feller," Ezra agreed solemnly. "This heres' thuh Laramie road, huh?"

Wack said, "That's right."

"An' a man'd turn off east to head to Cheyenne?" Ezra mused.

"That's right," Wack repeated. Then he went on excitedly. "And that's jest where them three pops come from. They sounded sorta off thuh road to tuhuh right when I heerd 'em."

"Which one of yuh wants to ride with me after him?" Ezra demanded. "I reckon t'other had better stay here an' wait fer Sam."

"I'll ride with yuh," Wack offered. "You stay here, Hank." He went to his horse, explaining to Ezra, "We better split so's we'll be shore not to miss him. There's a coupla trails branch off thuh main road right up yonder. One uv 'em goes straight to Cheyenne an' the other hits thuh Cheyenne-Denver road 'bout half-way between 'em."

"That's the shortest one, huh?" Ezra gathered up his reins and prepared to mount.

"Yeh. It's thuh shortest uv thuh two."

"I'll take it," Ezra said simply. "This here hawse I'm forkin' ain't built fer long rides." He settled himself painfully into the saddle and he and Wack rode ahead together a few hundred yards to a point where Wack pointed out a trail turning off. "That's thuh trail you want. The other one turns off a little ways on."

continued up the road. Ezra pulled up after a couple of minutes and got out of the saddle to light a match and squat down to scrutinize the trail in front of him carefully. He hadn't mentioned his uncanny tracking ability to the two strangers, first because he knew they would scoff at the idea of anyone being able to read tracks in this rocky ground at night, and secondly because he didn't want to tell them if he did discover he had selected the right trail. He preferred to settle this thing by himself without any help from the two cowboys.

He gave a little grunt of satisfaction as the light flickered out. His hunch had been correct. A ridden horse had passed along this trail within the past few hours. More than that, from the few meager indentations his match showed up, Ezra knew the horse had been mounted by a heavy man, and one not a practiced rider of the western trails. This rider had held a tight rein on his horse instead of letting him pick his own gait and path. Just like a foreigner, Ezra thought disgustedly.

There wasn't the slightest question in his mind when he remounted. This was the trail of the mad killer, and if he followed it long enough he would overtake the rider. Probably no other white man in the west could have read and correctly interpreted those tiny marks in the trail as Ezra had done, for he possessed a sort of superhuman instinct for reading trail signs. No matter how dark the night or how faint the trail, Ezra would never lose it now. A one-eyed, red-bearded Nemesis was on the Russian's trail and would follow it to the end.

The horse went on at a swift trot, stumbling over rock in the trail now and then because it was accustomed to traveling on city streets and smooth roads, and Ezra gave himself over to the job of trying to find a comfortable position in the saddle.

He hadn't taken time to shorten the stirrups on Hughes' saddle and they were a little too long to allow him to stand in them. He debated for a time whether to stop and shorten them, but by that time the

EZRA turned off on the trail with a grunt of farewell and Wack

inside muscles in his legs were so badly chafed that he didn't think standing in the stirrups would be very comfortable either.

He tried shifting his weight from one side to the other, and he tried spurring the trotting horse to a gallop, but nothing helped very much. His gallop was actually slower than his trot, and it wasn't much easier.

A wind blew up suddenly, and heavy black clouds obscured the thin moon overhead. A few big drops of rain spattered down, and Ezra greeted them with an angry curse. A rainstorm would wash out the tracks he was following, and it wouldn't make riding any pleasanter either. He generally didn't mind riding in the rain, but he knew that a wet saddle under him would cause his Levis to rub all the more as he jolted up and down, and the prospect wasn't at all pleasing.

The rain came down more heavily, and Ezra began anxiously peering through the murky night for some place where he could stop and take shelter until the storm blew over.

SUDDENLY he saw the faint flicker of a campfire ahead and a little off to the left of the direction in which the trail led. He spurred his horse on, forgetting his pain when he saw the dark shape of a clump of cottonwoods under which the fire was built.

The rain was pelting down harder now, and Ezra pulled his horse off the trail toward the inviting sight. He rode up at a walk with his hand ready on his six-shooter, expecting to be challenged by the camper in that remote region, hoping against hope that it might be the murderer he was looking for.

He rode right up to the edge of the cottonwood grove without arousing the man who sat cross-legged dozing in front of a small fire laid between two boulders.

Still watching him carefully, Ezra slid out of the saddle, repressing a grunt of pain as he did so. He looped the reins about a cottonwood limb and then advanced toward the fire boldly, ready for an instant draw.

The drowsing man turned around

slowly to look at him, and Ezra had a hard time holding back a whoop of triumph when he saw the black-bearded Russian.

It was him, all right, he thought exultantly. The same red shirt with the tails worn outside his pants, the same leather pants and limp leather boots Mrs. Hughes and Sam had described. He pulled his gun and sauntered forward, alert for any trick from the crazed killer.

The bearded man leaped agilely to his feet and greeted Ezra with a wide smile and a sweeping gesture of welcome. "You vish for come by my fire? Iss nice for 'ave company on soch a bad night."

It was him all right. The same funny way of saying things that Sam had graphically described. Ezra muttered, "Yeh. Thuh fire looks good," holding his gun ready to pour lead into the squat figure before him on the slightest provocation.

"Me, I am name' Murphy—American name," the Russian informed him happily. "Ve vill be ze frands, no?" He saw Ezra holding his unholstered gun and beamed with real delight. "Ah. Like in Roosia, you haff take off ze gon zo ve be real frands, no? Iss good." He stooped quickly and picked up a coiled leather whip which Ezra instantly recognized as the death weapon, and he made a ceremonious display of throwing it down to the ground. Then he folded his arms and announced proudly. "Zo. Ve are now ze frands."

Ezra stared at him incredulously. He didn't understand the fellow at all. Doggoned if he didn't act as friendly as a spotted pup. Sure didn't have any of the outward signs of a killer.

The broad smile on the bearded face was slowly replaced by a frown when Ezra made no move to throw his gun down with the Russian's whip. In a hurt tone, he asked, "You do not vish for be frands by Murphy?"

"Hell, I reckon I'd jest as leave," Ezra replied, thinking it might be best to humor the crazy man a little. "But what's that there whip got tuh do with it?"

The smile instantly reappeared. "Ah! Zen iss only zat you do not ondairstan' my costum. In my coun-tree, ziss iss zat ve be frands, zat no wepons stan' between us. Zen ve dreenk ze vodka togezzer, no?"

NOW that, Ezra thought, was a commendable suggestion. He could do with a sip of drinking likker, even if he'd never before tasted this vodka. He looked around for the goatskin bags he'd heard described, but he didn't see them. The crazy fellow probably had them cached out of sight, Ezra decided, and he might not ever get a drink if he killed him outright. The man was a good head shorter than he and not any wider in the shoulders, and Ezra was perfectly confident of his ability to handle him if they were both unarmed. He didn't see any harm in taking a drink that he felt he'd earned and needed, so he tossed his .45 down on top of the coiled whip, and drawled, "Awright. Trot out tuh red-eye."

The Russian clapped his hands and laughed delightedly. In this huge, red-bearded stranger he was certain he had at last discovered a kindred spirit in this strange America where few men understood him.

"Firs' I mak som fried meat by ze fire," he announced happily. "Ze new frands mus' eat togezzer an' fight togezzer an' zen dreenk togezzer."

"Drinkin' fust would suit me," Ezra grunted. "But I never turned down no vittles neither. Where's yore meat at?"

"I 'ave heem here." Yevgevny reached in a capacious pocket of his leather coat and drew out a greasy bundle. He unwrapped it to show Ezra a thick steak, then gravely squatted by the fire and thrust a sharpened stick through the meat, extended it toward the flame.

Ezra went around and squatted down opposite him. The odor of wood smoke and sizzling beef was tantalizing. He licked his lips and wondered if he'd be offered a drink with the meat. Dang it, the fellow certainly didn't act like any murderer Ezra had ever seen before.

When the steak was charred on both sides, the Russian inspected it critically and nodded, "I zink she ees feenish." He spread back his thick beard with one hand and nibbled at the meat, then handed the stick across the fire to Ezra. "Now ve are frands ven you eat alzo."

Ezra took it and bit out a huge chunk. He chewed it gustily and pronounced, "Mighty good, but it's sorta dry. You got nothin' tuh wash it down with?"

"Bot yess. Ze vodka." He leaped to his feet and hurried back behind a cottonwood tree. He reappeared with two goatskin bags proudly slung over his shoulder. He set them down by the fire and unlaced one bag, passed it across to the one-eyed man. "You dreenk an' zen ve fight, no?"

"Shore," Ezra agreed. "Thass jest what we'll do." He tipped the bag up and drank from it deeply. He set it down with a startled expression on his scarred face. "Danged if that don't taste like it's plumb twenty overproof."

"Iss frash an' got ze ponch," Murphy agreed happily. "You are not dreenk too moch zo ve can fight goot, no?"

"No," Ezra agreed absently, taking another sip and munching the rest of the meat. He was the friendliest murderer Ezra had ever run up against. He knew he should tie him up and wait for Sam, or even shoot him right now, but it didn't seem very polite to do it. And there was plenty of time for that, Ezra thought hazily.

"You 'ave not tal me your name," the Russian complained.

"Ezra," he mumbled.

The Russian tilted his head on one side and frowned. "You 'ave not ze more name as zat? Maybe a costum in America, like my name here is only one, also. Jus' Murphy. Bot in Roosia, ve haf at least three name—ze middle name for ze fathair, ze las' name for ze familee."

"Jest Ezra is plenty fer me," Ezra assured him with dignity.

Understanding dawned on the Russian. "I am ondairstan'," he said

sympathetically. "Bot zese mak no deefrence for me."

EZRA didn't know what he was talking about, but he reckoned it was all right just the same. He looked wistfully at the goatskin bag of vodka and said, "We gotta fight first 'fore we drink any more, huh?"

"Ziss iss ze costum in my coun-tree," Murphy agreed happily. "Ve rassale, no? Ven von iss hol' ze shouldairs off ze ozzer on ze groun' for two zeconds, he iss tak dreensk off vodka. Zen iss start all ofair."

"Lemme get it straight," Ezra mused. "We'll wrestle, huh? An' every time I put yore shoulders down fer two seconds I get tuh take a drink? Is that thuh way yuh do it?"

"Zat iss right. Neffer haff I zeen ze Americain zat ondairstan' zo goot. You like ziss costum?"

"Sounds fair enuff tuh me," Ezra agreed. He figured it shouldn't be too much of a trick to pin him down. And Ezra was scrupulously honest. He had a certain ethical compunction about hanging or shooting a man and then drinking his likker. It was politer—and kinder—to drink with him first and then complete the grim work after the victim was feeling pleasantly numbed. He got up and yawned, said, "Le's get started."

The Russian stood up with him and flexed his big arms. "You are ondairstan' ze rules?"

"Dunno as I do," Ezra muttered.

"No ponchink. Only ze rasslink."

"Awright by me," Ezra agreed.

They stood a few feet apart facing each other. The Russian leaped in the air and slapped his booted heels together three times while in the air, and shouted happily, "Ve start now."

They lunged at each other and in a moment were rolling about together on the ground grunting fiercely. Suddenly Ezra was sitting on the other's barrel-like chest pinning his shoulders to the ground. Murphy grinned up at him and panted, "You 'ave hold me ze two zeconds now."

EZRA let him up and reached for the goatskin bag, concealing a

grin behind one big hand. This was easier than he had anticipated. He was beginning to feel sorry for the funny fellow that didn't know how to talk straight.

He tipped the bag up and gulped down his winnings. He wanted to get a bellyful of it honestly before he picked up his gun and killed the Russian.

"Now ve go som more," Yevgevny announced. He jumped in the air and clapped his feet together three times again and lunged at Ezra, driving his round head into the big man's stomach.

Ezra laughed and let himself go to the ground in an easy somersault, landing his entire weight with a thud on top of the prostrate Russian and quickly pinning his shoulders down.

"You are ze werry goot rassler," the black-bearded man complimented him. "For vinnink two times togezzer you dreensk ze two times as moch. Ziss iss ze costum in my Roosia."

"I'd like that there country of yores," Ezra told him happily. "Danged if they don't have some good customs there."

He gulped from the goatskin bag deeply. Seemed to him like it was losing its kick the more he drank of it.

He kept on gulping the fiery stuff while he tried to decide whether it was actually weaker than before or if it was just his imagination.

"And Esra iss ze mighty drinkair too," the Russian complimented him when he finally lowered the depleted goatskin. "Neffar in ze life off Murphy hass se zeen ze dreenskink like ziss."

"'Tain't nothin'," Ezra disclaimed with a modest wave of his hand. "Nothin' but plain ol' potato cider, ain't it? Le's go again, huh?"

He stood up and took a wavering step forward and then fell flat on his face beside the fire. He breathed heavily but didn't stir as he lay there.

The black-bearded man stood over him and looked down fixedly at him for a couple of minutes. He nudged him gently with the soft toe of his boot, but Ezra lay in a sodden stupor.

He shook his head and said softly and with pathos in his voice, "Good night, my frand Esra. I hope you vill sleep sound."

He turned and walked around the fire to his coiled whip and Ezra's six-shooter, and picked them both up. He inspected the loaded .45 carefully and then walked back to kneel beside Esra who did not stir.

CHAPTER XIII

RIDING AWAY from Jim Stranch at a fast, bouncing trot, Sam Sloan was more than ever confused about things. Every time he saw Stranch he liked him less. The feller sure did rub him the wrong way somehow. He was glad Stranch wasn't his boss any more. It was a sort of relief to be fired from his job. He just wasn't cut out for that sort of business. Seemed like a great load was lifted off his shoulders.

This was like old times again, by golly. He and Ezra riding together after a murderer without having to take orders from anybody. - If Pat Stevens was with them everything would be perfect. But 'way down deep inside, Sam was glad Pat wasn't along. This was one time when he and Ezra would have a free hand. This was once, he swore an oath to himself, that they wouldn't find it necessary to call in Pat to help them out. He'd always had a feeling that he and Ezra could make out all right together without Pat if they just had the opportunity.

Here was their chance to prove it. He spurred his horse up to a faster trot, apprehensive lest Esra should come upon the Russian killer before he joined him. He knew how direct and forceful Esra's methods were, and he wanted to get a full confession out of the Russian before they finished him off. Not that he really doubted that he was the right man, but he couldn't help wondering why Stranch seemed to think he might be making a mistake; why Stranch had insisted so vehemently that the Russian should be given a fair trial.

It almost looked like Stranch had some inside information about the

killings, as though he had some good reason for believing the man innocent despite all the evidence against him. For that reason Sam wanted to catch up with Esra before the one-eyed man administered his own rough idea of justice to the Russian.

He pulled his trotting horse up sharply and unholstered his gun when a figure stepped out in the road in front of him.

Hank Slater called sharply, "That you, Sloan?"

"Yep. Where-at's Esra?"

"Yore one-eyed pardner? Him an' Wack rode off after tuh killer. Esra took tuh fust trail to tuh right off the road right up yonder. It cuts acrost country an' hits into the Denver-Cheyenne road."

"Where's Conover?" Sam asked, stepping stiffly from the saddle.

"Layin' right here where that murderin', whip-snappin' skunk left him." Hank led Sam over to the body and struck a match.

Sam stared down at the corpse and nodded slowly. "Same as Hughes, awright. You gonna leave him layin' here?"

"Yo're tuh boss," Hank reminded him in his nasal voice. "I was waitin' fer you tuh say."

"I'm not tuh boss no more."

"No? Since when?"

"Since Jim Stranch fired me a few minutes ago," Sam told him succinctly. He turned back to his horse. "I ain't givin' orders no more but I reckon you better pick him up an' carry him into yore shack up tuh road. I'll ride after Esra."

He pulled up into the saddle and winced as he settled his aching body in the leather seat. He devoutly hoped the trail would not be a long one.

HE HAD no trouble finding the place where Esra had turned off the road, and he let his livery horse out at a fast trot. A brief mountain shower had swept over this section while he was arguing with Stranch, and it had left the thin night air cold and biting.

He might have ridden right on past the clump of cottonwoods where Esra had kept his rendezvous with

the Russian if Ezra's tethered horse had not neighed when he smelled and heard his teammate trotting past on the trail.

Sam pulled up instantly and listened. He saw the group of cottonwoods indistinctly outlined against the dark sky, and he could hear a horse snorting and stamping its fore feet. He didn't hear anything else, but thought he'd better investigate and see who'd left a horse tied out in this lonely part of Colorado at night.

He rode over cautiously, and as he approached, his own horse nickered a soft greeting. He became worried and puzzled when he saw the horse was saddled, and was a bay with two white front feet. It was Ezra's mount all right. What the devil did it mean—him standing tied like this and no sign of Ezra about?

Sam dismounted and tied his own horse to the same cottonwood branch. The faint glow of a dying fire in the middle of the cottonwoods attracted his attention. He crept forward cautiously with his gun ready, and he was almost on top of Ezra before he saw the big fellow lying beside the glowing coals.

He dropped to his knees and felt of Ezra's body, was relieved to find it warm and to feel the strong beat of his heart. He struck a match and bent lower over him, gave an exclamation of deep disgust when he got a whiff of Ezra's alcoholic breath.

"Dead drunk," he muttered to himself. "Where in hell did he get it? Slippin' off an' drinkin' all by hisself." He stood up and kicked Ezra in the ribs.

The red-head's inert body remained lax and unmoving. He kicked his drunken partner again and cursed loudly, but didn't have any effect. He heard the gurgling of a small mountain stream along the edge of the grove and strode over there to dip his big Stetson full of the snow-water that was only a few degrees above freezing temperature.

He carried it back and dumped it full on Ezra's face.

The red-head gave a jerk, and muttered sleepily, "Rainin'." He turned

and threw up one big arm to protect his face.

Sam dropped to his knees beside him and got a firm grip in the matted beard and the coarse red hair. He pounded Ezra's head up and down on the hard ground, shouting loudly for him to wake up.

A few minutes of this rough treatment brought Ezra out of his vodka-induced stupor. He rolled over and sat up, clapping his hands to his head and groaning loudly. "Lordy me! If that feller'd stop poundin' on my haid with uh sledge-hammer, I'd. . . Oh! Howdy, Sam?" he ended weakly.

"Howdy, yuh doggoned pickled coyote," Sam snarled. "Fine way tuh do things. When'd yuh start slippin' off by yoreself tuh get dead drunk?"

"I wasn't by myself," Ezra protested. "There was this other feller. He liked me, see? We was gonna be friends. Where's he at?"

"Where's who at?" Sam snapped.

"Him. . . Oh, my gosh, Sam! I done plumb forgot. That was thuh Russian murderer. Him with thuh goatskin bags full of that heathenish likker! Did he get away?"

"Looks like he did," Sam growled disgustedly. "What in hell come over you, Ezra, tuh do like that? Looks like he got yuh drunk on his vodka an' then run off."

"I can't think straight," Ezra moaned, holding his aching head in both hands. "Seems like I can't get it straightened out nohow. He was my friend, an' . . . Could I have a drink of water?" he ended despairingly.

SAM got up and went back to the creek to refill his hat with the cold mountain water. He brought it back and handed it to his partner without comment, then gathered up some dry sticks and laid them on the hot coals, putting his face close and blowing on them gently until a blaze sprang up.

He settled back on his haunches and rolled a cigarette, muttering, "Tell me all about it."

"I was gonna shoot him, or tie him an' wait for you before stringin' him up," Ezra confessed unhappily, "but he was so doggoned nice an' friendly

it seemed plumb mean tuh shoot him fust an' then drink his vodka afterwards. He throwed his whip down tuh show he wanted tuh be friends, an' I didn't wanta hurt his feelin's so I throwed my gun down on top of it."

"Tuh keep from hurtin' a murderer's feelin's," Sam grunted sourly.

"He didn't ac' like no murderer," Ezra protested. "He was nice an' polite as yuh please. An' he cooked me a steak over his fire an' then we rassled like he said they did in his country fer thuh drinks. One that put the other down gotta drink. An' I won twict in a row. He weren't hard tuh pin down a-tall."

"Course not," Sam put in savagely. "He was playin' you along. Lettin' you throw him so's you'd drink the vodka an' pass out . . . jest like you done."

"Do yuh reckon he did that, Sam? He seemed so nice an' fren'ly."

"He wasn't nice an' friendly when he busted thuh necks of Henry Hughes an' Larry Conover," Sam reminded him morosely.

"That shore is a fact. Dang it, Sam, I dunno how-come I went tuh sleep. Didn't seem like that likker was so extra-powerful. Not after I'd had two-three drinks."

"I dunno why he didn't bust yore neck while you was layin' there drunk as a hoot-owl," Sam growled.

Ezra looked at him in one-eyed astonishment. "Shucks, he wouldn't of did that. Not after we et an' drank an' rassled together. That made us friends."

"He made a plumb damn fool outa you," Sam snapped.

Ezra stood up slowly, shaking his big head in utter misery. "I shore am sorry 'bout lettin' him get away," he groaned. "I reckon I jest nach-erly ain't very smart."

"I reckon you ain't," Sam agreed wearily. "Whatta we do now? That rainstorm washed out all thuh tracks, I reckon."

"Yeh, but we kin foller thuh trail to the Denver-Cheyenne road an' hunt down his hideout from there," Ezra said hopefully. He groaned with pain as he took a few shambling steps forward. "My hind-end aches

mos' as bad as m' head. You still forkin' that livery hawse?"

"Yeh. An' now we got to fork 'em all thuh way to Cheyenne, I reckon, jest 'cause you can't turn down a drink of likker." Sam kicked dirt over the fire and moodily followed Ezra to the two horses tied at the edge of the cottonwood grove. They mounted painfully and let their horses out in a trot.

Ezra bounced along silently for a time, and then he mumbled, "Shore did seem like a nice feller, though. An' I could easy work up a taste fer that there vodka of his'n."

"Now lissen," Sam admonished him firmly. "I don't give a damn how nice he acted or how much you like his likker. There's a widdier an' five orphans back yonder at thuh Hughes house we gotta think about. He jest ac's nice on account of he's crazy. He jest kills people fer the fun of it an' don't think nothin' about it."

"Didn't kill me," Ezra muttered. "Said we was friends."

"I know jest how he acts," Sam put in savagely. "I thought he was kinda funny an' nice when I fust met him in Stranch's office. Seemed like he was too kind-hearted tuh kill nobody. But we know different now. We gotta shoot him down like a mad coyote soon's we get clost enough."

Ezra nodded dolefully. "Yep. Justice has gotta be did. I won't palaver none with him nex' time."

THEY pressed on through the night at a bouncing trot, and neither of them wasted any more breath on words. It was all settled now. The Russian was a murderer and must be hunted down wi hout mercy. Ezra was dreadfully ashamed as he remembered how easily he had been taken in by the Russian. Made him sick to his stomach, and his stomach wasn't any too easy anyway with the vodka being sloshed around and riled up by the rough gait of his horse.

Struck by a sudden thought, he clapped his hand to the holster on his hip. His gun was there, all right. He couldn't remember picking it up again after the killer tricked him into disarming himself.

He drew it out surreptitiously so Sam wouldn't notice him, and spun the cylinder. Yep. It was still loaded all the way around. He couldn't figure that out. Why had the Russian replaced the loaded gun in his holster while he was passed out? It was a funny thing for a murderer to do. Ezra sighed and reholstered the weapon. He reckoned Sam was right. The Russian must be plumb crazy and didn't have any remorse or sense of guilt about the people he murdered.

Dawn comes early on the plains of northeastern Colorado. As the clouds began to clear away overhead, daylight broke through on the low horizon, revealing a flat, desolate landscape stretching out as far as the human eye could see in every direction.

The trail they were following led straight forward between low clumps of pungent sagebrush and all tracks had been erased from it by the heavy rainstorm of the preceding night.

It was a depressing sight to the two riders accustomed to the rugged, mountainous beauty of Southern Colorado and it served to lower their spirits still further as they pressed their tired horses on grimly. They knew they had covered a good many miles since leaving the clump of cottonwoods along the trail, and they began watching eagerly for some sign of human habitation ahead.

The sun had cleared the horizon when Sam finally stood in his stirrups and gestured ahead. "We're comin' to a wagon road yonder. D'yuh reckon it's the one between Denver an' Cheyenne?"

"I reckon it mus' be." Ezra's one eye searched the flat country ahead. "Which way we gonna turn when we hit thuh road?"

"That'll be a guess, I reckon. All I know is the Russian claims he's hidin' out in thuh woods somewheres on the road from Denver to Cheyenne."

"Ain't no woods in these here parts," Ezra muttered disconsolately.

"Yes there are. Look yonder." Sam pointed excitedly to the left. A low, indistinct blur showed on the

sunlit landscape where he pointed, and as they rode on it soon became apparent that it was a thickly wooded area standing out curiously stark and alone in contrast to the sagebrush and greasewood around it.

"Yo're right, by cracky," Ezra agreed after a moment. "Looks like it lays right off thuh road yonder too. Why don't we head off thuh trail straight towards it?"

Sam agreed, and they swung their tired horses off the trail and headed directly toward the wooded area. In that flat country, distances were deceptive, and they discovered they still had many miles to ride before they approached the edge of the woods.

The wagon road did circle right past it, and when they got close enough they saw why the road didn't pass through the woods. There was a high, woven-wire fence along the edge of the woods, and beyond this barrier they saw lush green grass, and in the distance a large one-story lodge constructed of unpeeled logs flanked by symmetrical rows of trees that looked as though they had been planted there years before.

They turned into the road and followed along the fence until they finally came to a pair of imposing stone gateposts with a straight graveled road leading up to the house between a double row of tall poplars.

"You don't reckon the Russian lives in that there estate, do yuh?" Ezra asked doubtfully as they turned in at the gate. "It ain't thuh kinda hideout I was lookin' fer."

"It's purty fancy-lookin'," Sam admitted, "but I dunno. I reckon he's got scads of money else he wouldn't be talkin' about startin' his own Express route. We'll ride up an' ask anyhow."

THE lodge loomed up larger and more imposing as they neared it. It was surrounded by graveled walks and carefully kept flower beds, and looked more like the State Capitol grounds in Denver than anything else they'd ever seen. There were barns and neatly painted outbuildings behind the main residence, but the two riders pulled up in front and

got off, fighting back an inner feeling of awe, and determined not to be too much impressed by all this grandeur.

They both stumbled and almost fell to the ground when they first tried to stand up after their long night in the uncomfortable saddles, and they clung to each other for a moment while they loosened aching muscles and took a few careful steps forward.

A flagstone walk led up to the big rustic front door, and there was a heavy copper knocker by the knob.

Sam reached for the knocker and then reached for his gun and looked back at Ezra who was painfully hobbling up behind him. "Don't forget," he warned. "We're gonna shoot fust this time an' then ask questions afterward."

Ezra, still suffering from both the pangs of vodka, and guilt at letting the Russian escape, nodded his red head determinedly. He pulled his .45 and said hollowly, "Le's go, pardner."

Sam lifted the knocker and dropped it resoundingly.

Nothing happened for a time. Both men faced the door with their guns out, fingers on the triggers. Sam reached for the knocker again and pounded it up and down.

The knob turned and the door opened slowly. A tall, square-jawed woman faced them in the opening. She wore a crisp gingham apron and she had a mole on her upper lip. Her eyes flashed angrily at sight of the two gun muzzles pointed at her, and she planted both hands on her hips, demanding, "What do you gun-totin' weasels want this time of the mornin'?"

They lowered their guns uncertainly and Sam mumbled, "We're sorry, Ma'am. Do you live here?"

"I'm the cook," she said acidly. "And my breakfast's on the kitchen stove right now. If this is a hold-up . . ."

"No'm, it ain't that," Sam assured her hastily. He slowly reholstered his gun, nudging Ezra to do the same. "Yuh see, Ma'am, we're huntin' a murderer, an' . . ."

"There aren't any murderers here.

Only an English gentleman and my husband and me that keep house for him. Be off with you now, or . . ."

What is it, Mrs. Murch?" a voice called out from behind her.

The aproned cook turned to call back, "Nothing for you to bother with. Couple of gun-totin' line-riders that aim to scare me out of a free meal."

"Wait a minute," said Sam hastily. "Is that Lord Harry somethin' or other? Is this where he lives?"

"That will be all, Mrs. Murch," said a quiet voice behind her. "When I engaged you and Mr. Murch in Denver I didn't tell you I required the services of a bodyguard, you know."

She stepped back reluctantly and a tall, stoop-shouldered man with a long, horsy face peered out at them. He wore a silk dressing gown and leather slippers, but Sam Sloan recognized him at once as the man whom he had last seen coming out of a drunken stupor at the log shack of Hank Slater and Wack Beadle after a bout with too much American whisky.

Sam grinned at him and asked politely, "Have them little men quit poundin' on the inside of yore head yet?"

Lord Harry blinked at him and looked bewildered for a moment, and then smiled his recollection of that unhappy occasion.

"You're the Pony Express man. The one who cut the martingale of my horse that morning while I was . . . ah . . . asleep."

"Thass right. An' mighty nigh got strung up for hawse-stealing by Hank Slater an' Wack Beadle 'fore I could tell 'em I was their new boss."

"They told me about that," Lord Harry said. He looked questioningly at Ezra.

"Meet my pardner, Ezra. This here's Lord Harry," he told Ezra importantly.

"Wooster," the Englishman murmured. He extended a limp hand toward Ezra, winced as the big man engulfed it in his own and boomed, "I'm shore proud tuh meet up with yuh . . . Lord."

EZRA looked startled and glanced about uneasily in the bright sunlight as he heard his own words. It sounded irreligious but he didn't know how else to address the Englishman.

"Delighted," Lord Harry murmured, withdrawing his hand hastily and putting both of them behind him. "Won't you come inside? If you have time to spare I think Mrs. Murch will have some breakfast ready soon."

"I don't reckon we'll have time tuh eat," Sam said, disregarding Ezra's pleased expression, "but we'd shore like tuh talk to you."

They followed their host inside to a huge living room with bearskin rugs on the floor and decorated around the walls with antlers and various hunting trophies.

A fire blazed in a huge stone fireplace at one end of the long room, and Lord Harry led them toward comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace, explaining, "I find your Colorado mornings a bit nippy and a fire helps to take off the chill."

They settled themselves comfortably in the deep chairs and Sam said with a grin, "You got plumb over yore hangover, I reckon?"

"My hangover?" The Englishman looked puzzled and then threw back his head and showed a mouthful of white teeth as he laughed loudly. "A bit of your American slang, isn't it? I'm afraid I was a bit hung over when we last met, Mr. Sloan. Tell me, how is your Express route doing?"

"Not so good," Sam muttered. "We're huntin' us a murderer. A murderin' furriner. Thass why we stopped off here tuh see you."

There was a curious silence in the room for a moment. The Englishman's face retained its pleasant expression, but his features hardened a trifle. He repeated, "A foreigner?"

"That's right," Ezra said loudly. "We've got the plumb deadwood on him. 'Nother of Sam's riders got killed las' night."

"Not one of those chaps we were just speaking of?"

"No. 'Twasn't Hank nor Wack," Sam told him. "'Nother feller I jest

hired tuh ride a leg of tuh route." "Killed, eh?" Lord Worcester looked thoughtful. "There would appear to be an epidemic of deaths in that vicinity of late."

"I dunno about that," Sam muttered. "Too many people are gettin' murdered with their necks broke by a rawhide whip. An' that's why we're here this mornin'."

"Indeed?" The Englishman appeared on the defensive. "I assure you I know nothing. . . ."

"We know you don't know nothin' aboot nothin'," Ezra put in quickly. "A man has only got tuh talk tuh you five minutes tuh find that out. But we reckoned you might know where this murderin' skonk is, you livin' so clost to him an' all."

Their host looked at Sam in bewilderment. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand your friend."

"I reckon that makes you an' him even," Sam said wearily. "I'm plumb shore he don't understand you whatever. What he means is we think tuh killer is hidin' hereabouts. We want 'im."

"Hiding here? In this house, you mean?"

"Naw. Not in yore house, I don't reckon, but mebbey in these here woods."

"But my hunting estate comprises most of this wooded area. I'm quite sure none of my servants are guilty of . . ."

"No. I reckon not. We're lookin' fer a furriner. A real furriner, that is," Sam amended hastily. "Not a English furriner."

"I don't know," Lord Harry Worcester furrowed his brow in deep thought. "Certainly you can't suspect Mr. Kuzmademyanski—or Mr. Murphy, I should say, since he prefers that name. True, he is a Russian, but he seems a superior type. He has such a novel method of hunting large game. Most amazing."

"With a whip, huh?"

"You must have been hunting with him yourself! And his gesture of triumph when the game is downed! I was impressed by that. Three loud cracks with the whip. . . ."

"He's our man," Sam said angrily.

"Where's he hidin' out at? You got him in yore woods?"

"But, are you certain? He seemed such a jolly sort. Something of a toper, perhaps, with a fondness for vodka, his native drink, but . . ."

"That's him," interrupted Ezra excitedly. "Allus drinkin' vodka. Totes it around every place in them goatskin bags."

"Quite," chortled the Englishman. "And very good it is, too. But not exactly as mild as 'potato cider'."

A GRIN spread over Ezra's whiskered face and slowly he began to chuckle in unison with Lord Harry.

"All that ain't got nothin' to do with him bein' a murderin' varmint," Sam put in angrily. "A man don't hafta drink vodka before he can crack a whip. We're out tuh hang his hide on tuh fence an' wanta know where he's hidin'."

"But, do you represent the law?" asked Worcester anxiously. "What sort of trial will the fellow get if you contact him?"

"We don't try his kind in Colorado," Sam told him.

"By jove! So this is to be an example of the native justice I've heard about," beamed the Englishman. "Excellent! A necktie party, perhaps."

"We aim tuh shoot him like we would a rattler," Ezra put in eagerly. "He's a slick 'un all right. Me, I let 'im get away las' night 'cause I felt sorry fer tuh pore cuss."

"An' wanted tuh drink his vodka 'fore you put a bullet through his guts," Sam interrupted disgustedly. "No sirree," he went on to Lord Harry. "We don't aim tuh waste no time *dis-cussin'* things with him. Soon's we're shore we got him dead tuh rights we'll fill his belly with hot lead."

"What makes you so sure he's your man?" queried the Englishman cautiously. "I believe I can direct you to his residence, but I hesitate to do so without knowing what proof . . ."

"Proof?" burst out Sam bitterly. "We got all tuh proof in tuh world agin' him. Kills things with uh braided leather whip, don't he?"

Lord Harry nodded. "But . . ."

"An' pops it three times after each kill," Sam went on implacably. "That's happened right after both fellers was killed. An' he's tryin' tuh stop tuh Pony Express route tuh Laramie. Wants it tuh go by this way so's he kin git his lottery tickets faster from Denver."

"So that's it!" exclaimed the Englishman excitedly. "I wondered what his motive could possibly be. And I thought he was merely crazy when he came to me to discuss his project and buy livestock from me."

"What project you talkin' about?"

"Why, the private Pony Express route." Lord Harry Worcester looked at him in mild surprise. "It was a few days ago when the bearded fellow approached me. Oh, he was quite agitated. I gathered he had been in Denver attempting to change the route from Laramie and had met with no success. And he offered me a fantastic price for a number of my blooded horses. The Arab strain appealed to him particularly."

"How many did he want?" Sam asked brusquely.

"Some absurd number. Twenty, I believe. Of course, I assured him it was preposterous. Why, I have only enough to equip a proper hunting expedition."

"Did he say what he wanted of yore A-rabs?"

"That's the most incredible part. Something about starting a private Pony Express route from Denver to Cheyenne."

"Shore," growled Sam. "You didn't sell him tuh hawses, huh?"

"Certainly not. And a few days later when I encountered him, he explained that he was no longer in the market since he had succeeded in purchasing an entire herd of some half-bred mongrel stock . . ."

"Wait uh minut," exclaimed Sam excitedly. "You don't mean 'mongrel'; half-bred *Morgans*, wasn't they?"

"Perhaps. From some ranch in one of your southwestern states, I believe."

"New Mexico?"

"I believe it was New Mexico,

though I can't recall the name of the ranch. From some lady, I think."

"The Molly Day ranch?" demanded Sam.

"Yes. That's it. It is indeed."

"So he's the one queered that deal too," muttered Sam. "That settles it," he told Ezra and Lord Harry. "Them was thuh hawses Hughes was buyin' in Denver an' I got beat out of. That Rooshian's our man, awright. Where-at did yuh say we'd find him?" he demanded of their host.

"Why, er, I don't believe I said," Lord Harry shook his head slowly. "No. I'm quite certain I didn't."

"Start talkin' then," grated Sam.

"But I have been talking," he protested. "I've talked quite at length on a number of subjects."

"Where does that bearded skunk hang out?" Sam demanded harshly.

"Hang out what? I wasn't aware . . ."

SAM SLOAN shook his forefinger in the Englishman's face. "Damn if I don't believe yo're stallin'. Mebby yo're in cahoots with him."

"My dear fellow . . ."

"Wait a minut, Sam," Ezra put in earnestly. "This here jasper ain't bin tuh school much. You gotta use short words thet he kin understand." He turned to the Englishman and spoke slowly, scowling over each word and emphasizing it by thudding a fist into his palm.

"Where . . . is . . . thuh . . . Rooshian?"

Lord Harry's face cleared. "In the woods at the rear of my estate. He lives in a sod lean-to that contains no furniture whatever. A rank hovel. Yet the fellow appears to have no lack of wealth. I cannot understand such slovenliness."

"Come on," said Sam, with a sigh, to Ezra. "That's all we need. We ride back along thuh fence east, huh?" he added to Worcester.

"Quite correct. If you wish, I'll send a man to guide you to his place."

Sam shook his head. "I reckon we'll finish this here up ourselves. He's got them Morgan hawses there, I reckon?"

"In a small paddock just at the rear

of my main estate," Lord Harry assured him. "If there's a prospect of gun-play, I'd like awfully to witness it. I'm most interested in these native customs."

"We'll finish him up without no witnesses settin' on thuh corral fence," Sam growled. "All I wanta see is them Morgan hawses he stole off'n me in Denver."

"I assure you that you will find them there," Lord Harry told him stiffly as both men arose.

"Looky here," said Ezra doubtfully to Sam, as though the Englishman were a child who couldn't understand them. "You reckon he'd give us thuh loan of a couple of his hawses tuh ride on? -Seems like I'd split plumb wide open in thuh middle if I gotta fork that livery nag again."

Sam hesitated, his hand straying back to touch that portion of his anatomy that had been in contact with a bouncing saddle all night. "We shore could do with a couple of ridin' hawses," he reflected. "How 'bout it, Lord? You got a couple you could spare us a couple of days?"

"You wish to borrow horses from me? But certainly you men didn't walk this far?"

"Wouldn't be much sorer if we had," Ezra grunted. "We got buggy hawses, that's what."

"I must insist that you ride two of my fastest Arabs," said Lord Worcester sympathetically. "I'll order the stableboy to prepare Selim and Balthaser at once." He paused a moment reflectively. "Without martingales, Mr. Sloan?"

Sam grinned briefly. "I won't have thuh ruin good leather if you leave thuh martingales off. An' we'll ride our own saddles ef'n you don't mind. They're on them two winded livery nags standin' outside."

"I'll attend to it at once," Lord Harry Worcester promised. He got up and walked back the length of the long room, opened a door at the rear and called, "Mr. Murch."

A strident voice answered him from farther back, and he went on through the door and they could hear the murmur of voices as he gave instructions for two horses to be sad-

dled with their rigging from the livery horses.

Ezra grinned at Sam and muttered, "He's a funny feller, but fer my money he's awright. You reckon they got any more like him over in England?"

"Scads of 'em, I reckon. Be nice if he'd offer a man a drink, but I reckon it'd be tea if he did." Sam broke off as their host came back with a smile and said:

"It's all arranged. The horses will be ready for you in a few minutes."

CHAPTER XIV

A FEW minutes later Sam and Ezra stood on the front steps of the hunting lodge and watched a tall, raw-boned man leading a pair of beautiful high-stepping Arab thoroughbreds up from the barns.

Their host stood beside them and smiled at the expressions of admiration on their faces. "I brought this racing stock out particularly because I had heard of your western sport of chasing coyotes across the plains. I've had some wonderful chases already."

Sam said, "Racin' stock, huh?" his eyes glued on the flowing lines of the two magnificent animals being led up.

"They look plenty fast," Ezra agreed doubtfully. "Won't neither of 'em weigh over a thousand pounds, though. Fast an' flashy, but not too much stayin' power, I reckon."

"Plenty of staying power," their host assured him with a smile, "to overtake your western coyotes on a straight run. Thank you, Murch," he added to the man who stopped in front of them. "And good luck to you both," he said to Sam and Ezra.

They thanked him, and as Sam stepped down to take the reins, he turned back and promised; "We'll bring 'em back to you safe enough in a couple of days."

The Arab snorted and pawed the ground and pranced away as Sam threw one rein over his neck and tightened the reins. He got his left foot in the stirrup and gave the

thoroughbred its head. He swung into the saddle as it surged away and headed it down the straight lane toward the main road.

The blooded horse stretched out low above the ground and became a blur of smooth motion. Sam turned in the saddle to see Ezra right behind him. He reined his own mount in gently and laughed at the expression on Ezra's face as his partner pounded up abreast. "Like ridin' in a rockin' chair," he shouted above the roar of the wind created by the racing horses. "I ain't never gonna laugh at fancy Eastern hawses no more."

"Me neither," panted Ezra. "We turn to thuh left on the road, huh?"

"Yep. An' ride along the front fence till we come to thuh east corner. He says there's a road leading down thataway to where the Rooshian lives."

At the end of the fenced estate a trail led off from the main road eastward as Lord Harry had told them. They swung around the fence corner and followed the trail along the edge of the wooded area, sitting their saddles easily while they covered ground with a smoothness and speed neither of them had ever before experienced.

The high woven wire fence enclosing Worcester's estate stretched ahead of them for more than two miles, and the growth of trees began to thin out when at last they reached the end of the fence. From this point on the expensive woven wire was replaced by a simple three-strand barbed wire fence, and Sam pointed out the change to Ezra by grunting, "This must be the beginnin' of that there pasture thuh Lord said was on the back of his place, where the Rooshian's got his Morgan hawses penned up."

"He didn't call it no pasture," Ezra commented. "I didn't rightly get what he said, but 'tweren't nothin' I ever heerd a pasture called afore."

"Paddock or somethin' like that," Sam grunted. "English way of sayin' pasture, I reckon. Yep! Look yonder," he exclaimed, reining down a little. "If that ain't a herd of half-

bred Morgans grazin' yonder I'll eat my boots, spurs an' all."

"Shore are," Ezra agreed, standing in his stirrups to survey a herd of clean-limbed horses grazing beyond the barbed wire at some distance. "Looks like that's thuh shore enough deadwood on ol' Murphy, awright," he went on mournfully, his tone indicating that he had been hoping against hope this final proof would not turn up against the friendly bearded man.

"Tell yuh what." Sam frowned and pulled his horse down to an easy lope. "I bin doin' some thinkin' about them there hawses."

"It don't show none on yore face," Ezra retorted. "Ain't left no signs a-tall."

SAM SLOAN disregarded his partner's facetious remark. "If the Rooshian bought them there hawses in Denver from the commission house, it musta bin because he'd give up tryin' tuh change the reg'lar route from Laramie an' was aimin' tuh start his own private Pony route."

"Shore," Ezra agreed impatiently. "That's what Lord Harry said."

"Then why in tunket did he go out las' night and kill Larry Conover with his whip?" Sam demanded.

Ezra's big mouth dropped open slackly. He pulled his horse down to a sudden stop so he could think better. He shook his head and pleaded, "Say that over ag'in. Slow. Seems like I sorta see what you mean."

"We figger the man that killed Larry Conover is still tryin' to block the Laramie route," Sam explained patiently. "But if the Rooshian's already decided tuh open up his own mail route tuh get his lottery tickets in fast, why does he care whether our route runs through Laramie or not?"

Ezra enthusiastically slapped his thigh with an open palm. "You got somethin'," he roared excitedly. "By golly! When I was drinkin' an' rasslin' with him las' night I couldn't hardly believe Murphy was thuh murderer."

"But Larry's neck was broke with a rawhide whip just like Hughes' was, and there was them same three pops afterwards that the Rooshian allus makes," Sam argued.

Ezra's face clouded over again. "Fust off you say it *ain't* him, an' then you say it *is*," he complained. "Wish you'd make up yore mind."

"I don't say it is him an' I don't say it ain't. I'm tryin' tuh think it out straight, like Pat does. If he did buy thuh hawses like he told Wooster, he didn't have no reason tuh kill Larry Conover. If he killed Larry I don't reckon he had thuh hawses bought."

Ezra scowled uneasily as he tried to follow his partner's reasoning. "I wish Pat was here," he muttered. "He allus knows jest what's what."

"Damn it! We kin get along without Pat this one time," Sam swore angrily. "All we gotta do is use our heads. We'll ask the Rooshian one simple question 'fore we load his guts with lead. If he did buy them hawses, we'll do some more thinkin' 'fore we shoot. If he didn't, we'll go on like we started. Let's find him right now."

He loosed the reins and his Arab was off again like a shot. Ezra's steed was right behind, and they thundered on down the path through the thinning woods until they came suddenly to a clearing at the base of a low, sandy cliff where the barbed wire fence ended abruptly.

A sod lean-to was built against the bottom of the sandy cliff, and as they pulled up in front of it a huge bent figure came out of the lean-to and blinked at them in the bright sunlight.

It was the bearded Russian who called himself Murphy. His black bearded face broke into a broad smile of welcome when he recognized his drinking and wrestling friend of the preceding night.

"Eet ees Ezra," he boomed happily. "Com for make weesit by Murphy. Velcom, my good frand."

BOTH men slid off their horses and stalked forward in ominous silence. The Russian was unarmed,

without even his deadly whip in evidence, but they stopped twenty feet from him with their hands on their guns.

The man's huge smile faded slowly as he observed their silence and strange actions. A look of childlike bewilderment came over his face. He leaned forward and peered at Ezra, asking contritely, "You 'ave not got ze mad for Murphy, my frand? Ze vodka, she has got ze ponch lak I am tal you."

"Forget about thuh vodka," growled Sam. "We've rode all this way tuh ask you one question."

The Russian switched his questioning gaze to Sam. "Iss Meestair Zloan zat I am not frands for no more. Vat you vant, hey?"

"He's m'pardner," Ezra muttered. "He wants tuh ask you somethin'."

"So? Ask Murphy an' he vill tal you. He vill not tal ze lie." He pounded his huge chest and straightened up challengingly.

"It's about them hawses we saw back yonder in thuh pasture," Sam told him. "Are them yore stuff?"

"Bot no. In that fence iss not Murphy's. In zat fence iss . . ."

Sam nodded and drew his long-barreled .45 slowly. "That's all I wanted tuh hear you say. Yo're a murderin' skonk an' . . ."

Ezra moved suddenly. He knocked down Sam's arm, shouting, "I ain't gonna let yuh do it, Sam. I jest can't stand here an' see yuh shoot him down."

The Russian smiled happily and spread out his arms as though to embrace Ezra, taking a long stride forward. "Ziss are my good frand," he beamed. "Ve dreenk ze vodka an' we rassle like in . . ."

"Damn it, Ezra," Sam panted. "What'd yuh do that for? You heard him say them wasn't his hawses."

"I can't he'p it," Ezra said stoutly. "He ain't no murderer. He ac's too much like me tuh be a murderer. Where are yore hawses at?" he asked the Russian.

"Zay are in Denwer," Murphy told him. "I am feex' for start ze Pony mail of Murphy like I am tal you in Denwer," he added with a frown at Sam.

Sam's mouth was hanging open by this time. "You did buy a bunch of hawses tuh start a new route, huh?"

"Vy not?" the man demanded. "I tal you I mus' 'ave ze lottery tickets vrom ze Mexico—werry queek, or I lose ze money. Zo I am buy ze horses . . ."

"Wait a minute," pleaded Sam. "Who in hell do these Morgans back yonder b'long to?"

"Zem?" Murphy flung out his arm. "For zat Englishman zat liffs in ze beeg house. I am buy som from heem an' zose he hass left ofer."

"You mean them Morgans are Lord Harry Wooster's?" Sam ejaculated.

"Zat iss zo." The Russian nodded emphatically.

"He sold you some an' had them left over?"

"Zat iss zo," the man repeated. "I am buy fife for breeng . . ."

"Where in hell did he get 'em? What'd he want of all them Morgans?"

"Zat I cannot tal. He iss breeng zem from Denwer ze nex' day after I am tal you I vill start ze route off my own, an' I am buy from heem."

SAM reholstered his gun. He looked at Ezra, and Ezra looked at him. Both men squatted down on their heels and gravely rolled cigarettes. The Russian stood in front of them with his broad hands on his hips, a pleased expression on his face. He was glad that Sam didn't seem to be angry at him for keeping his threat about opening up a private express route of his own.

Sam lit his cigarette and held out the match to the tip of Ezra's. He inhaled a big puff of smoke and began talking in a low tone as though to himself:

"So thuh Englishman bought thuh Morgans in Denver an' brought 'em out here an' sold fife to this here hombre. An' he tells us he don't know nothin' about nothin'. An' he sics us out here tuh see his hawses in a pasture, tellin' us they belong to thuh Rooshian? What thuh hell d'yuh make of it, Ezra?"

"I wish Pat was here," Ezra said dully.

Sam Sloan sighed deeply. He was

a man broken in spirit. "So do I," he confessed. "Pat Stevens has got a way of figgerin' what's what. But we're forgettin' somethin'." He brightened and looked at the Russian. "What were you doin' over near by the Hughes' las' night if you weren't poppin' yore whip an' killin' people?"

Murphy squatted down awkwardly in front of them. It was an unfamiliar posture for him, but he wanted to act as his American friends acted.

"I am so-o lonely for see Miz Hoos an' ze leetle wans," he admitted. "I zink she iss werry fine lady."

"Is that why you murdered Hughes?" asked Sam sharply. "So you could hang around his widow?"

"Bot no. I am not keel ze Meestair Hoos," Murphy assured him earnestly. "Like I tal Miz Hoos, zese zingse zay say about Murphy are not ze truth. Zese lies zat I am keel Meestair Hoos from my whip. An' she are onderstand, I theenk. She zay she onderstand. Bot zen she go for ze gon an' I ride away," he ended sadly.

"Wait a minute." Sam was busy trying to straighten things out. "Who said what about you that wasn't true?"

"Zat I am keel people from my weep."

"You know, she told us about him comin' the next day after Hughes died and tellin' her them things wasn't true," Ezra reminded Sam.

"Where did you hear them lies?" Sam demanded.

"In ze house off zose men, Hank an' Wack," Murphy responded readily. "Zat morning before I go to ze Miz Hoos."

"From Hank an' Wack, huh?"

"I hear zem tal ozzer men," the Russian said with dignity. "Zay are talk about ze three weep cracks an' zay eet iss like w'en I am mak ze kill."

"Wait a minute," said Sam excitedly. "They mentioned the three pops, huh?"

The Russian nodded.

"I'd bin there an' tol' 'em aboot Hughes bein' killed but I didn't mention them three pops," Sam muttered to Ezra. "I'm danged shore I didn't.

Then how'd they know? How-come they were spreadin' hints aboot yore Rooshian friend before they even knowed aboot them whip-cracks?"

Ezra got up excitedly. "Now yore figgerin' like Pat Stevens," he complimented his pardner. "Only way they coulda knowed about it was by bein' there when Hughes kicked off. Looks tuh me like whoever did it musta knowed about Murphy's whip, and figgered tuh lay thuh blame on him by makin' them three pops."

"Looks thataway," Sam grunted. "At the fust I thought 'twas did by a rawhide riata."

"Wonder which one of them carries one."

"Neither of 'em. Not on their saddles."

"I'd like tuh ask 'em a few questions," Ezra said angrily.

"An' I'd like tuh ask Lord Harry Wooster uh few," Sam put in. "He's clostest."

Ezra nodded. "After we finish with him we'll hunt up Hank an' Wack."

Both of them started for their horses. They had forgotten the Russian until he called plaintively from behind them, "You vill not stay for dreenk ze vodka an' be frands?"

"We got bizniss," Ezra told him. He hesitated. "But sorta concerns you," he added. "Whyn't you come along an' bring one of them goatskin bags? After our bizniss is finished mebbey we kin all take a little swig."

"Iss good," Murphy agreed happily. "I vill ride by you an' breeng ze vodka for dreenk ven bissness iss feenish."

CHAPTER XV

IT TOOK the Russian only a few minutes to saddle a shaggy, barrel-chested pony and join them. A pair of goatskin bags hung beside his saddle, flapping against his pony's flanks, and the pungent odor that came from their laced tops caused Ezra's mouth to water as the Russian rode up between them.

Sam saw him licking his lips and looking hopefully at the gurgling bags, and he warned sharply, "No

funny business now till we finish things up. There ain't but three of us, and Lord only knows how many men Wooster's got hid out around that place of his."

They started back in a trot so the Russian could easily keep pace with them, and Ezra asked, "Where d'yuh reckon he stands, Sam?"

"Who?"

"That crazy Englishman."

"Damned if I know," Sam confessed. "He don't act like he's got sense enough tuh stand nowhere, but you can't never tell about a hairpin like that. I reckon he done some fancy lyin' this mornin', an' it looks like he's in on thuh plan tuh get Murphy, here, accused of whatever's happenin'."

"I don't see how he figgered on gettin' away with that lie this mornin'." Ezra mused. "He musta knowed Murphy would tell us thuh truth."

"I got that figgered out," Sam announced. "He waited tuh tell us until we said we didn't figger on askin' the Rooshian no questions if we had thuh deadwood on him. We said as how we'd blast him on sight. That's when he tol' us about the hawses. Remember?"

"That's right. He shore thought he wasn't takin' no chances. He'll be plumb s'prised tuh see three of us ridin' back," Ezra added, with a glance at their companion.

The Russian showed a double line of strong, white teeth in a delighted smile. "You are forget, mine frand. Of us zay are four."

"I can't count but three," Ezra said, blinking.

Murphy threw back his head and laughed heartily. His hand went forward to his saddlehorn, where western riders customarily carry a coiled lariat, and he lovingly lifted the supple coils of a braided leather whip. "You are forget my frand zat keels an' zen giffs ze three pops. Zat mak us four," he told Ezra confidently.

Sam Sloan wasn't listening to the conversation between the other two. He was shading his eyes against the bright morning sunlight and gazing ahead and to the left of where the trail intersected the main road from Denver to Cheyenne.

"Somebody's ridin' hell-bent out thuh road from Denver," he muttered. "Burnin' up thuh road, looks like. Can't no hawse hold that pace long."

They all studied the small cloud of white dust that was balling up rapidly along the road from the south. "One rider," Ezra announced flatly. "An' he shore ain't sparin' hawseflesh. We'll jest about meet him at thuh road if we both keep on like this."

"You know what?" Sam confided to him in a low tone a few moments later with his gaze fixed on the approaching rider. "I got half a mind tuh slow down an' let him go past without seein' us."

"Who yuh think it might be?"

"I can't get it outta my mind that Pat Stevens ain't never let us finish up nothin' by our own selves before," Sam admitted angrily.

"You reckon that there's Pat Stevens?"

"I wouldn't be none s'prised. Jest like him tuh bust in when we're right on thuh tail-end of somethin'."

Ezra frowned darkly and studied the small form of the racing rider with deeper interest. After a few minutes he shook his red head and announced decisively, "'Tain't Pat. He never pushed a hawse thataway. That rider ain't mindin' if his hawse drops dead or not, an' Pat never rode the four legs off nothin'."

SAM brightened up after hearing Ezra's definite statement. It didn't occur to him to question his one-eyed partner's judgment. If Ezra said the oncoming rider wasn't Pat—it wasn't. He would have felt the same way if the rider had been fifteen miles away. Ezra had an uncanny prescience in such matters and had never been wrong in all the years that Sam had known him.

They were a quarter of a mile from the crossroads when Ezra settled back in the saddle and announced with satisfaction, "I know who that there horse-killin' rannic is."

"Who?" demanded Sam.

Ezra looked quite pleased with himself. "I ain't never seen him but onct an' that at night, but it's him,

awright. I kin tell by thuh way his hawse's hind feet send thuh dust spurtin' up."

Though this was manifestly an absurd way of recognizing a speeding rider more than half a mile away, Sam asked gravely, "All right. Who is it?"

"That feller you stopped off tuh talk to las' night. Thuh one you said was yore boss."

"Jim Stranch? The one that tried to fire me last night?"

"I dunno his name an' I dunno 'bout you gettin' fired by him, but that's thuh feller."

The Russian had been listening to them, looking anxiously from one to another as he tried to follow their conversation in a language foreign to him. Now he said, "Meestair Stench. Heem I do not like. I try for talk by heem in Denwer an' he iss insult me."

Sam nodded agreement. "I ain't got no likin' for Jim Stranch neither," he agreed. "But I'm wonderin' why he's ridin' out here hell-for-leather this morning. Let's hurry, so's we won't miss him at thuh road."

They let their mounts out to a lope, and pulled up at the cross-roads a few minutes later. The speeding rider was plainly visible now, and Sam studied him for a moment before grunting to Ezra, "Danged if you ain't rung thuh bell ag'in. It's Stranch, all right, an' he'll be settin' a dead hawse 'fore he pushes it another mile thataway."

They settled back grimly to wait for the Pony Express executive to come up to them. Jim Stranch was mounted on a big-boned gray, lathered from head to foot and straining to keep up the killing pace. Stranch was hunched forward on his withers like a jockey, using a quirt freely with his right arm to flail the last ounce of speed from the willing animal.

He didn't look up to see the small group by the side of the road until he was almost upon them and then not until the running stride of his exhausted horse faltered and broke. Sam rode forward alone to meet him. Stranch straightened in the saddle

and surveyed them with a bleared gaze, swaying drunkenly while his horse slowed to a stumbling walk. "Sloan!" he called out desperately. "Thank the Lord I've found you! I didn't know where to look. I was headed for Cheyenne . . ."

"Better step down an' let yore hawse blow a bit," Sam suggested grimly. "I reckon you an' me'll have a little talk."

"That's what I want," chattered the man nervously. "Ever since last night I've been worried, frightened . . ." He slid off his horse and steadied himself against the saddle, looking at Ezra and the Russian. "I see you didn't . . . you didn't carry out your threat," he began brokenly, but Sam interrupted him. He, too, dismounted, and he pulled his .45 and approached the man who had hired him to run the Pony Express route through Laramie.

"It's time we had some plain talk, Stranch, 'special since you ain't my boss no more. I was right, weren't I? You did sell out yore company. You hired Hughes an' me, 'cause we was fambly men an' you thought we'd quit easy."

"I didn't . . . Yes," said Jim Stranch with sudden resolution. "I admit it. But I thought I was doing right. I felt the route should go through Cheyenne instead of Laramie from the beginning. I didn't take any money for it. I swear I didn't. Though Leland Pepper offered to pay me. I thought it was in the best interests of the company to hire two weak men who wouldn't put up much of a fight."

"A couple of men that was easy tuh kill off," Sam put in angrily.

"No! I swear I didn't plan that. Pepper didn't tell me he planned that. I didn't know Hughes was to be killed," babbled Stranch. "I knew that Hank Slater and Wack Beadle were in Pepper's pay, but I didn't know they would go so far as cold-blooded murder. I've been sick since Hughes' death. Literally sick. I didn't know what would happen to you. I begged you to give it up in Denver. In my office. You know I did."

“IT WAS a man named Pepper that bought them Morgan hawses,” Sam Sloan growled. “You put him up to that, I reckon?”

“Yes. I admit that. But not murder. I didn’t bargain for that. After Conover was murdered last night I didn’t know what to do. And when you made out your case against this man . . .” He looked at the Russian and shuddered, “. . . and threatened to ride after him, I simply didn’t know what to do.”

“Where is this here Leland Pepper?” Sam brandished his gun under Stranch’s nose. “Seems I remember tuh Rooshian askin’ about him, too.”

“I don’t know. Somewhere around Cheyenne, I believe. He’s the Eastern capitalist who has recently invested heavily in Cheyenne real estate. I was riding to Cheyenne to try and find him. I didn’t sleep last night. The death of innocent men weighed too heavily on my conscience. When I find Pepper I’ll confront him with the truth. I’ll turn him over to the law. He’s responsible. I’m sure he ordered Hank and Wack to do his killing for him.” Stranch sank down to the ground as he finished. He covered his face with both hands, and his shoulders shook with exhausted sobs.

Sam Sloan stared down at him for a moment, then slowly holstered his gun. He turned away from the broken man and called to Ezra and Murphy. “We’ll put this skunk on ice, Ezra. He’s done confessed to just the tricks I figured he was up to. He ain’t worth stretchin’ a rope for, but tuh big boss of the Pony Express’ll be mighty interested in what he has to say.”

They both nodded eagerly and rode forward. “All we gotta do now is tuh find this here Leland Pepper,” Sam continued eagerly. “And, by golly, Murphy, yo’re in tuh clear, ol’ timer. Put ‘er there.” He stuck out his hand.

The Russian, however, didn’t appear to see it. He let out a joyous whoop from his bearded lips, and leaning from the saddle threw both arms about Sam Sloan.

“You—you say sees name!” he

shouted excitedly. “Zees mans I haf been hunting for long time since my frand Beeg-Foot McCann vas found keeled! Peppair! Ven ve find heem, eh? Zat men iss murderer! Zen ze last off ze Kuzmademyanski make ze beeg kill! Zen I am really earn my new American name Murphy. Zen I die happy! . . . Now, ve haf wan dreenk from vodka, no?”

“No,” said Sam Sloan curtly before Ezra could agree. “We still got work tuh do. We gotta hunt up this murderin’ yahoo Pepper, an’ then find Hank an’ Wack.”

“I jest thought of somethin’,” said Ezra proudly. “I bet Lord Harry’d know where this Pepper hangs out. Him bein’ a rich Englishman an’ all, an’ livin’ clost to Cheyenne.”

“Yeh,” said Sam slowly, “I wouldn’t be none s’prised but what there’s some hook-up twixt the two of ‘em. Pepper bought them hawses in Denver, but Wooster turned up with ‘em out here tuh next day an’ sold a bunch of ‘em to Murphy. I reckon our leetle talk with tuh Britisher is plumb overdue.”

Sam helped Ezra tie Stranch securely in the saddle, and the four started down the road at an easy lope, with Murphy riding behind Stranch as guard.

It was a short ride to the graveled entrance to Lord Harry Worcester’s hunting lodge. They took the prisoner off his horse and made him fast to the bole of a cottonwood, then the trio swung in between the tall gateposts and started up between the double row of aspens and were halfway to the lodge before the first warning shot rang out.

A rifle bullet screamed through the morning stillness above their heads and there was the sharp crack of a hunting rifle from ahead.

A tiny puff of smoke drifted upward on the still air above one of the windows of the lodge as Ezra and Sam flung themselves from their saddles and rolled to the safety of the side of the road between the sheltering trees.

Not so the Russian called Murphy.

True to the instincts of his Cossack forebears, he rose in his stirrups and charged forward at a mad gallop,

shouting a Russian battle cry at the top of his booming voice and unfurling his only weapon as he rode.

CHAPTER XVI

CROUCHED side by side beneath the trees, Sam Sloan and Ezra watched the charge of the mad Russian with amazement and dismay. It was an incredible display of daring and complete disregard of personal danger in the face of impossible odds.

Standing in the stirrups, weaponless except for the forty-foot braided whip trailing out behind him, he thundered forward into the teeth of crackling rifle fire that spewed bullets from three of the west windows of the lodge.

They kicked up spurts of dust beneath the pounding hooves of his horse and sang through the air about him like angry bees, but he swept on unscathed, miraculously protected by Providence or by the shaken nerves of the riflemen to whom he must have seemed a fearsome symbol of vengeance beyond the reach of mortal death.

"Lookit him go!" shouted Ezra exultantly. "What're we doin', squatin' here like a couple of dummies?" He jumped to his feet excitedly but Sam Sloan pulled him down, growling:

"He'll never make it. The plumb damned crazy fightin' fool. They'll mow him down 'fore he ever gets there."

But the Russian was still in the saddle, still driving on defiantly with his goatskin bags of vodka flopping frantically behind him with each step of the shaggy pony while his booming voice rose above the sound of disorganized rifle fire in a strange song of the Russian steppes that promised death to his enemies.

And still the bullets missed him as he galloped closer and closer. It was crazy and impossible, but it was happening before the eyes of the two men, who knew it couldn't happen.

Suddenly Sam Sloan let go Ezra and sprang to his feet with his black eyes glittering. "C'mon," he yelled

as though it hadn't been he who had held his partner back a moment before. "They're so busy slingin' lead at Murph that they ain't noticed us. We kin make it up there . . ."

Ezra was right behind him as he darted forward along the road. The eyes of both were glued on the galloping figure ahead who disregarded all the rules of a gunfight, and their hearts were in their mouths as the Russian swiftly closed the gap between himself and the hunting lodge.

He was swaying in the saddle now, and they knew he had been hit, but his magnificent courage carried him on and he didn't falter. His voice rose higher and higher in a frenzied chant, and he drove his pony point-blank at the center of the three windows from which the rifle fire came.

As they ran forward desperately, Sam and Ezra witnessed a sight that gave them something to talk about for the rest of their lives. It was a foolhardy and incredible exhibition of sheer desperate courage, and it seemed suicidal as they watched it happen; but later they were to realize it was the only thing for a man to do after getting into the position that the Cossack put himself in.

This was no time for caution. The slightest faltering on his part would have brought instant death. At the window, three desperate men were firing wildly at him as he surged upon them, and given a moment to gather their wits about them, they would surely have shot him down.

Murphy didn't give them that moment. Pressing his advantage to the utmost, he drove straight for the center window without slacking speed, and his heavy body left the saddle in an arcing dive when his horse put on four-leg brakes and came to a sudden stop.

The charging man hurtled straight through the window, with glass shattering loudly about him.

THERE was silence from inside the lodge. Sam and Ezra ran on desperately and there were no more bullets to dodge. Murphy was seeing to that. Inside the lodge, the three ambushers were too busily occupied with a berserk Cossack to

waste time or lead on his two companions running toward the house.

Their hearts were pounding wildly and their breath was short when they reached the front door of the lodge. It stood ajar, and Ezra sent it slamming open with a thrust of his shoulder as he reeled into the wide living room with Sam right behind him.

There was a crashing sound from the right, and a high-pitched scream of anguish.

They stumbled on with drawn guns to survey an incredible scene of violence and wreckage.

Dominating the room was the burly figure of the Russian. His long hair was flying and blood dripped from a bullet furrow along his cheek, but he stood erect with gleaming eyes and his shortened whip popped viciously across the room three times while he threw back his head and shouted:

"Like ziss are ze enemies of Murphy dying. T'ree cracks for ze A'nk, an' zen. . ."

"Hold it, Murph," shouted Sam as he saw Wack Beadle and his erstwhile Lordship cowering abjectly in corners of the room waiting for the terrible wrath of the Russian to descend upon them. "Let's talk to 'em fust, then you kin pop yore whip all you damn please."

A happy smile spread over the Russian's face as he saw his two comrades in the doorway with drawn guns. "You vant I not keel zem, no?"

"No. That is, yes! Shore! I don't blame yuh none," Sam panted. "Where-at's Hank?"

Murphy solemnly pointed the handle of his weapon toward a pair of legs protruding from behind an overturned chair. "I 'ave keel heem ze first, an' now. . ."

"Fer gawd's sake," blubbered Wack desperately, crawling toward them on his knees. "Take that crazy Roossian outta here. He busted Hank's neck. He ain't human! Bullets bounce offen him. I seen 'em with my own eyes." His voice rose to a wail and he fell forward, clawing at his throat and babbling hysterically.

Lord Harry Worcester sat up in

his corner and tried to look dignified, though his face was drained of color and saliva drooled down from his mouth corners. When his teeth stopped chattering sufficiently so he could speak, he whined, "You're just in time to save us. . ."

"Save yuh, hell!" snarled Ezra. "Less'n you'd rather have lead poisonin' than a broke neck." He took a step forward and lifted his gun, but Sam intervened hastily, "Not yet, Ezra. Let 'im talk some fust. Yo're really Leland Pepper, ain't yuh?" he demanded of the masquerading Englishman.

"Yes. I'll tell you anything. I'll do anything if you'll take the Russian's whip away from him."

"You hired Hank an' Wack tuh kill Hughes with a broke neck, an' make three whip-pops, so's Mrs. Hughes'd think it was the Russian, huh?"

"Yes," the Eastern capitalist whined. "I persuaded Jim Stranch to hire two family men to run the route, thinking you and Hughes would scare easily. It was really Wack's idea to do the killing with a rawhide riata so it would look like the work of a leather whip. He. . ."

"That's uh lie," roared Wack Beadle. "That was Hank's idee. He figgered we could pass thuh word around about thuh crazy Rooshian killin' people like that, an'. . ."

"What's that there stickin' out from under yore shirt?" asked Sam ominously. He strode forward and leaned over the terrified man, jerked up his shirt-tail to show a rawhide riata, neatly coiled about his waist.

"Shore, I carried thuh riata," mumbled Wack. "But I tell yuh 'twas Hank's idee. Him an' Mr. Pepper. They figgered it all out together."

"An' you pertendin' tuh be a Englishman jest in case things went wrong," Sam flung angrily at the cowering financier. "You ain't wuth wastin' lead on." He turned and marched stolidly toward Ezra who still stood back with his gun covering the two frightened men.

"Iss zat all, my frands?" asked Murphy hopefully from the center of the floor. "'Ave you feenish ze Americain costum of talk from ze prisoner before he ees die?"

"Thass all we gotta say," Sam Sloan told him gruffly. "Me an' Ezra will be outside waitin' for yuh." He gave his partner a mighty nudge and pushed him toward the door.

They went forward together and Ezra protested in a shocked tone, "We hadn't oughtta left Murphy in there alone with them two. No tellin' what'll happen."

"I've got me uh plumb good idee," Sam told him grimly. They walked out into the sunlight and stood there for a moment, straining their ears to hear something from the house behind them.

THEY heard nothing. The silence of the tomb had descended upon the hunting lodge in which Leland Pepper had masqueraded as an English nobleman while he practiced his murderous deceit to force the Pony Express to change its route from Laramie to Cheyenne in order to protect his extensive real estate holdings in that town.

Then they heard the heavy slow tread of the Russian's soft-leather boots coming down the carpeted hallway.

The big man was smiling happily as he stepped out of the open doorway behind them. His black beard was matted with blood but he seemed otherwise none the worse for his death-defying ride. His long whip trailed out behind him and it rustled like a thing alive as he struck a statuesque pose with his right hand lifted above his head.

Sam and Ezra watched in fascination as his wrist gave the merest perceptible movement and the whip glided forward. It rose a foot above the ground as it straightened out, and the snapper gave off a crack that echoed loudly in the stillness.

Moving only his wrist, he cracked his deadly whip again and again, and thrice more. He then lowered his whip and began to coil it lovingly.

None of the trio said anything. The Russian's whip had spoken more eloquently than his halting speech could possibly have done.

At last, in the stark silence, the Cossack spoke. "I've found ze murderer off my frand, Beeg-Foot," he

said slowly. "He weel keel no more. Pair-haps in zees 'ouse we find real proof zat he hired my frand kill'. Pair-haps not. But, for me, I am satisfy'."

Sam Sloan was silent for a moment. "Likely we'll find that, and other proof of what that snake had been up to, Murph. You go out and see that Stranch is still safe out there, and Ezra and I'll take a look-see hereabouts."

As they watched the Russian step outside, Sam and Ezra's eyes met. The ghost of a grim smile played about their mouths. They knew above all, that from now on the lives of the Pony Express riders on the Laramie route would be safe as long as the mail was carried.

CHAPTER XVII

IT WAS A few days later that Pat Stevens rode up to the Hughes ranch one afternoon just as the sun was setting. Mrs. Kitty Sloan opened the door and looked out as he swung off his horse. She ran toward him with her arms outstretched and her hair flying, crying wildly, "Pat! What's the matter? Where's Sam? Oh Pat! What's happened?"

Pat's face was grave as she threw herself into his arms, sobbing with fright. He patted her shoulder and said awkwardly, "Hold it now, Kitty. What's up? I don't know nothing about Sam. Where is he? What's happened?"

"I don't know," Kitty sobbed with her face pressed against Pat's shoulder. "When I saw you I just thought. . . well, I thought you'd know. You've always taken care of them. You're like a couple of crazy boys without you to guide them."

"Better not tell Sam an' Ezra that," grunted Pat. He gently held Kitty away from him to look into her eyes. "Tell me about it."

"They rode off last night on the trail of a murderer. A crazy Russian who rides around killing people with his whip and then popping it three times. And right after they left, Sam's boss stopped by and he was awfully angry and said he'd met

Sam on the trail and ordered him not to go on but Sam refused. So, he got sore and quit his job. Oh, Pat! I'm so terribly worried!"

"Left his job, huh?" Pat seemed more worried about that than the possible consequences to Sam if he had met up with the murdering Russian. "Might've known they'd mess things up between 'em," he muttered. "I had a hunch I should of come sooner, but Sally talked me out of it. She said I should leave 'em alone for once an' let 'em figure things out for their own selves."

"What are we going to do?" Kitty wailed. "It'll be dark soon, and S-Sam isn't here. Seems like I can't stand it not knowing."

"You come on in the house an' quiet down," Pat Stevens advised her. "Just remember hasn't either of 'em ever got themselves killed yet. I'll wait awhile an' rest my hawse, and then I'll take out on their trail if they haven't showed up."

It was almost dark by the time Pat got Kitty fully quieted down. Mrs. Hughes and the little girls had helped a lot. Though their husband and father had recently been murdered, they were very sympathetic and understanding about Kitty's fears for Sam's safety, and the five little orphan girls solemnly sat around the living room playing gay and lilting tunes on their instruments while Mrs. Hughes cooked up a good supper and Pat got the whole story of what had happened from Kitty.

"Now you just quit worryin'," he told Kitty Sloan cheerily after he had finished eating supper. "I'll ride down the trail and find them two and bring 'em right back here."

"How'll you find them?" Kitty asked. "You don't know which way they went or anything."

"I'll drop in and pay Hank and Wack a visit," Pat told her. "They'll know which way Sam went. Thing is, just you don't worry."

He strode to the door of the ranch house and pulled it open. The last vestiges of daylight still lingered over the foothills and the first stars were beginning to timidly peek out overhead.

He paused with his hand on the

doorknob, cocking his head to listen to a faint and bizarre cacophony that came echoing faintly through the twilight. He frowned and muttered, "Shore don't sound like no coyotes I ever heard before." He turned back to Mrs. Hughes and demanded, "You haven't got no laughin' hyenas in these here parts, have you?"

The widow looked startled and shook her head. "Never heard of any all the years I've lived here."

"Ever hear anything like *this* before?" Pat beckoned her to the open doorway.

She came and stood beside him, listening intently. "Sounds almost human," she said after a time, "but I guess it surely can't be."

THE discordant sound was becoming louder each moment, seemingly moving steadily toward the ranch. By that time Kitty and the little girls had joined them in the doorway and all listened wonderingly as the sound grew in volume, sometimes rising high and plaintive in a minor key, and then fading away to a dull roar that was like the sound of giant waves laughing uproariously as they spent themselves upon a rocky shore.

"It is human," Pat decided suddenly. "By golly, it shore is. Almost anyhow." He listened again and nodded. "Might be Indians on the warpath only there ain't been Indian-fighting in these parts for a good ten years. An' besides that, no Indians I ever heard sounded like that there. I'd say 'twas some kind of foreigners though. Half a dozen of 'em, maybe. You folks better go in and pull the shades an' lock the doors while I see what's what."

"There's a whole troop of them," Vera Hughes said excitedly. "I can hear their horses now. Forty or fifty, maybe. You girls run down the cellar and hide," she ordered her brood. "No telling what terrible thing is going to happen."

Pat was frowning indecisively. He started to speak, then stopped to listen again. The sound was quite close now. No more than two hundred yards distant. His face was very grave when he told Kitty, "Get hold

of all your nerve, girl. I don't know what's what, but I'll swear Sam and Ezra are two of the fellows making that noise."

Kitty's face went white. She swayed against the doorjamb for a moment, and then stepped out beside him. "If Sam's still alive. . . that's all I care." She caught his arm pleadingly. "Oh Pat! Are you sure?"

At that moment a herd of horses topped a small ridge and came trotting toward the ranch. Behind them, the figures of three riders showed indistinctly through the twilight haze. They were swaying drunkenly in their saddles with arms about each other's shoulders, and they were singing loudly and happily off key and in a language that no one had ever heard before.

Pat grunted disgustedly as the truth came to him. "They're just plumb besotted drunk," he told Kitty. "Sam an' Ezra an' somebody else. An' they're drivin' a whole herd of fine Morgan hawses in," he ejaculated. "Thirty head at the least. An' look at the hawses Sam an' Ezra are straddlin', Kitty. Racin' studs, shore as shootin'. Thought you said they rode off on livery hawses from Denver."

"They did." Kitty was clinging to him and sobbing in her relief. "That must be the Russian with them, Pat. The one they thought was the murderer."

"An' he's been teaching them his songs," Pat agreed dryly. "Lord only knows *what* kind of mess they've got themselves into this time."

Muttering under his breath, he strode out to the corral and threw the gate open to let the trail-weary herd of half-bred Morgans surge inside, and then he angrily confronted the trio who pulled up in front of him.

Sam Sloan whooped with glee and let go of Murphy to slide out of the saddle. "Shm'old pard, Pat," he exclaimed. "Wonnered where you wash at." He took a staggering step forward to hold out his hand, and then turned waveringly to face Kitty who came to him on flying feet.

"Don' shay it, honey," he muttered.

"I kin splain ever'thing. Just gimme thuh chanch an' I kin splain. . ."

His faltering words were smothered by Kitty's mouth as she threw her arms about his neck and covered his face with kisses.

EZRA and the Russian were still locked together in a hearty embrace in their saddles, and Ezra said mournfully, "Looky that there mushfulness, Murph. Plumb downright sh-sickenin', ain't it?"

"Ish g-good," the Russian hic-coughed genially. "Now ve dreenc ze vodka, no? You veel dreenc by ush, no?" he asked Pat politely, reaching back for a goatskin bag now less than half full.

"Ish Pat Shtevens," Ezra pointed an unsteady finger at Pat and turned to the Russian. "G-good feller, but sh-sorta dumb." He threw back his head and laughed loudly. "Thish time, fooled yuh good. I kin talk Rooshian, too. Fixed everything oop like noz-zink. . . even though Murphy's trap didn' work out. Hell, he didn' need no trap!"

"Trap?" frowned Pat. "What thuh hell yuh talkin' about, yuh drunken galoot?"

Ezra went limp with laughter. "Th-that was good' ole Murphy's idee to git Pepper out here from New York. Murph was fixin' to start his own Pony Express route that would run from Cheyenne to Denver. He wash-was shore there'd be a lot of money in it, an' then Pepper would git wind of it, an' try to take it away from him, like he did the freighter outfit that Murph wash-was workin' for. B-But Pepper wash right there, all the time! Sho pore ol' Murph went to all that trouble for nothin'!"

The Russian straightened, letting Ezra relax limply in the saddle. "It vas good idee, I zink, anyhow," he grinned loosely. "And I was werry lucky on Mexican lottery—once." Then his whiskered face saddened, and large tears began to roll from his eyes. "Too late yet to help out my frand Beeg-Foot. Bot maybe, anyhow, he know how ze Cossack Murph get ze payment for Beeg-Foot's dyink. It vas by Pepper's men he

(Continued On Page 112)

MAVERICK-MISTER!

By CHUCK COOK

It's a word that is now part of the West and of America—but the trouble it's caused!

"ACCORDING to the rules of the Stockmen's Association—which we both signed—any maverick belongs to the owner of the range it's found on. Right?"

"Yes, I reckon you're right."

"Then, I reckon you'd better grab for your hogleg, neighbor. Them's my maverick's you was planning on branding in this back draw, and this is my land. I don't like Mavericks—Mister!"

The two men would snake for their guns—and one man would ride away alive. One more death chalked up to the word "maverick."

How often little dramas like this took place in the cattle country of the sixties, seventies and eighties is unknown. But, it's a fair guess that the one word "Maverick" caused more deaths in the far west than any other single word. Perhaps more than liquor, women and sheep—combined!

The word itself, means an unbranded cow of the age of one year or more. Any critter that avoided the branding fires for a year was a Maverick—and, technically belonged to whose range it was found on. However, in the early days, in the free grass days—anyone with an iron and ambition—could build up a herd of Mavericks—provided, he had a gun he didn't mind using to save his life when the occasion warranted. More than one cattle fortune was founded on a small spread, and maverick branding!

WHERE did the word come from? What's the story behind it? Well, there are a hundred yarns of how the word "maverick" came into the language of the cow country.

One yarn gives the credit to a business-wise Frenchman who started with a very small ranch and herd and in a few years was the biggest rancher in the district—the reason being that he branded all yearlings he came across that weren't all ready wearing the owner's brand. This Frenchman gave the name "mauvric" to an unbranded yearling cow. He built a fortune on the word he'd invented, and did it simply by having his rannys watch carefully for all so-called "mauvrics" and to be sure to brand them with the Frenchman's brand before riding on. Whether the present word "maverick" dates back to the Frenchman or not is anybody's guess. But, you have a choice of yarns.

MORE logically, the word could have resulted from the fate of Colonel Samuel A. Maverick during the Civil War. Colonel Maverick is reputed to have gone off to the war between the states leaving his cattle to take care of themselves in his absence. When he returned, years later, he found that his fellow soldiers had helped themselves to his unbranded adult cattle—calves born and grown-up during the war years. So much Colonel Maverick cattle was branded by others at this time that the term "maverick" has since been applied to all unbranded adult cattle.

Then there's the yarn about the same Colonel which shows him in a better light. It seems that prior to the Civil War, the stockmen of Colonel Maverick's district were bent on forming a Stock Association, registering brands, range, and the like.

The first meeting rolled around to find all the honest ranchers gathered in the nearest town hall. The Chairman conducted the meeting splendid-

ly until he found that Colonel Maverick was the only rancher who had not registered a brand. The Chairman rose from his chair and demanded an explanation from the Colonel.

Maverick smiled and got up from his place at the back of the hall. "Wall, now, since all yo' gentlemen have chose yo' brands, I'll jes' let my brand be nothin' at all Hyarafter, yo' all will know that a cow with no brand is a Maverick."

The Chairman, a bit flustered, stood confused a moment, and then declared it so. Or, so 'he story goes anyway. The silly angle of the whole thing being—that any cattle the other ranchers raised, but which they failed to get branded automatically became Maverick cows. We don't know how many seasons the ranchers tolerated this, for they were honest men who stuck by their word, but we bet it wasn't long until Colonel Maverick was asked to register a brand of the regulation sort. However, the quick-witted Colonel undoubtedly gleaned many a steer to which he wasn't entitled!

BUT PERHAPS the most authentic story of all, the one generally accepted by western historians concerns a legal man—not a cattle-man at all!

Colonel Samuel A. Maverick, a lawyer in San Antonio in the year 1845, received 400 longhorn cattle in payment of a legal fee. There being no market for the steers in that year, the Colonel sent the cattle to his ranch forty miles south of San Antonio. He put his black slaves in charge of the herd and proceeded to forget about them.

His slaves, not noted for their energy or efficiency, completely ignorant of the cattle business, and without the good Colonel anywhere near to do any checking on the number of cows they branded, let most of the increase of the herd, the calf crop, grow to maturity without feeling the hot iron. This continued for several years.

After this time had elapsed, Colonel Maverick was approached by a neighbor, Toutant de Beauregard, who offered to buy Maverick out. Range-cattle—buildings—and slaves, too. The Colonel overjoyed, agreed to the sale immediately.

De Beauregard, being a systematic man, held a tremendous round-up covering the entire range of Maverick, and perhaps overlapping his neighbors, ranges somewhat for boundaries were not ironclad things. For, according to the terms of the sale, de Beauregard bought not only the branded cattle—but also all unbranded cattle he found on the Colonel's land. The news of the "Maverick" round-up spread like wildfire and fellow ranchers began to keep an eye open for their own "maverick" cattle that might have hidden themselves away in back draws while the branding irons were hot. From this beginning the word has spread all over the cattle country.

You can take your choice as to which story is the true origin of the word, but more than likely you have your own version. In any event, whether you're in Hawaii, Texas, California, Wyoming or Alberta—an unbranded yearling is still a "Maverick."

(THE END)

**BUY and HOLD
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While The Hang-Noose Waits

By BRETT AUSTIN

Even if the law discovered that he'd killed Fred MacGuire, Bart Sampson figured he had a sure-fire out!

A BLAZING fire had turned Bart Sampson's wheat field into charred stubble. The day before, the wheat would have run forty bushels to the acre; now it was worthless. Sight of the blackened land was enough to affect any ordinary man . . . but Bart Sampson was not an ordinary man.

Sitting his lathered bronc, he looked at the ruins with a twisted smile on his unshaven lips as he thought of Fred Maguire. He could kill Fred Maguire now. . . . For Maguire — and Maguire only — had burned down this wheat!

He lounged in his saddle, blood-flecked eyes serious. For two days he had been hunting wild horses back in the rough country and now he had returned to this—Fred Maguire had walked into his trap by burning his wheat.

For three years, he had wanted to kill Maguire. The trouble had started when he had stolen a Maguire Circle N calf. He had figured that the unbranded calf had weaned himself. Yet, at fall roundup, the calf had been still sucking his mother—a Maguire cow.

Maguire had accused him of rustling.

They fought savagely. Sampson outweighed the middle-aged cowman but what Maguire lacked in weight, he made up in guts. And when it was over, big Bart Sampson lay in the coral dust—beaten by a smaller, older man.

An ordinary man would have shaken hands, forgotten the fight. But not Bart Sampson. Bitter, beaten, he lay there—men stood silent, looking at him. He nursed those cold memories—they grew in his twisted, ugly mind. And with the days, his hate grew stronger. Now,

looking at the burned wheat field, this hate glowed and ebbed like a hot coal.

Maguire, he figured, had burned that field.

HE DISMOUNTED, felt of the burned stubble. Still warm. . . . He straightened, tugged up his sagging .45s. He turned his horse south into the hills. Maguire lived some three miles south, there on Snake Creek.

He grinned crookedly. Many nights he had lain awake, figuring out some logical way to kill Maguire. Ambush? A rifle spitting from the brush? No. . . . Local residents might suspect him of the murder. That would lead him up the steps to the gallows. He ran his fingers to his throat. He had seen a man hanged once, seen the body hit the end of the rope. The rope had snapped, the knot slapping the condemned behind the ear, breaking his neck.

Sampson would have to drive Maguire against him. But Maguire was an easy-going fellow; hard to rouse into action. Then, one night the solution came, and the easiness of the plan brought beads of sweat to his forehead, made him clench and loosen his heavy hands.

Maguire had sworn in public that no farmer would ever settle on his range. He'd run the hoeman off with lead and fire. But to make sure he held his Circle N range, he had his punchers settle on homesteads, then he bought their land from them. He had settled Gabby Jones on lower Snake Creek.

Bart Sampson had bought out Jones' rights.

The rights had cost him far more than the land was worth, and Jones had ridden out one dark, storm-lashed

night. But he had not ridden far; Bart Sampson had ambushed him, taken his money off the dead man, buried him in a lonely gully.

He fenced in the homestead, sowed wheat. His barbwire kept Circle N steers from water. They had stood against the sharp-pronged fence and bawled in thirst. Cursing Circle N punchers had driven them around the wire to water.

"I'll buy that place," Maguire had said.

"Not for sale."

Maguire studied him. "You hate me, huh, Sampson? Well, I'll give you three thousand for that strip."

"Not for sale."

"Four thousand?"

"Damn it, I'm not sellin', savvy?"

Maguire held his temper. "A few dry years will drive you out of there," he had said.

But the cowman had been wrong. There had been a lot of rain that spring and the wheat grew quickly. Another rain, coming in June, had insured the crop's success.

One day Sampson caught Maguire sitting his horse, looking at the golden wheat. The cowman had struck a match to light his pipe, and he had held the burning stick between thumb and forefinger, looking at the wheat.

"Don't think that," growled Bart Sampson.

Maguire had grinned, made no reply.

Bart Sampson chuckled, now. Maguire *had* burned that field—

THE Circle N was located in the cottonwood trees. Horse hidden by brush, Bart Sampson sat there, studying the spread. He watched for hours, saw no living man. Evidently Maguire was out with his roundup crew. Bart Sampson was ready to turn his horse when he saw the cowman come from the mess-hall.

He went to the barn.

Bart Sampson's eyes were narrow slits. He knew that Mrs. Maguire was in Eagle City, under the doctor's care. Luck was with him—evidently old Fred was home alone. He'd call him and kill him. And if he was questioned, Sampson would say he

saw Fred burning his wheat, had trailed him and given him a fair break before shooting.

But still, he was careful. He came down on the ranch on foot, leaving his horse in the brush. The way he figured, with the Circle N crew out on roundup, the cook was off the ranch, too. But to make sure, he looked in the cook-house. Nobody was in the long room with its wooden tables and benches. There were no pots on the stove. He settled back, thinking.

Finally he came to the conclusion that Maguire had stuffed the stove with trash, burning it in the cook-stove. Still, he went to the house, went in the back door. The house was empty. He paused, thinking.

One more place left to look—the harness shed and saddle shop. But there was nobody here, either. He pulled the air into his lungs, realizing his tenseness. Now if there was nobody but old Maguire at the barn—

He looked in a hay-window. The oldster was cleaning stalls. And he was alone. That meant he was the only man, outside of Bart Sampson, on the Circle N. Sampson stepped through the back door, his hands on his guns.

"Turn aroun', Maguire!"

His voice boomed, turning the man. Maguire studied him, eyes thin.

"What do you want, Sampson?"

"You burned my wheat field, huh?"

Maguire saw the red hell in the big man's blood-flecked eyes. "Burned your wheat field? Why, Sampson, I never burned—"

"So you lie, too!" clipped Sampson. Maguire toted his old .44 Colt, tied low on his right hip. "Jerk that gun, Maguire, or come with me to the sheriff's office!"

MAGUIRE'S trembling hand, stiffened with rheumatism, quivered over his gun. He knew that if he went with Sampson, he would never reach the sheriff's office. Once in the badlands — Sampson would send a bullet through him and bury him there. And nobody would ever be the wiser.

Sampson read the man's indecision, grinned. He deliberately half-turned,

and Maguire, seeing a chance, drew. But the cowman had not seen Sampson raise his right-hand gun from leather, for the man's thick body had hidden the movement. Maguire died before his gun left leather. He never had a chance!

Sampson walked to the man, kicked him twice in the head, then took his gun and fired it twice, shooting into the manure pile. Grinning crookedly, he stuck the gun in Maguire's fingers, walked to his horse. That way it would look like Maguire had committed suicide.

Everything had worked out okay. Because Maguire had been alone, nobody would know Sampson had killed him. He felt warm and good inside. He remembered Maguire's denial that he had burned the wheat. The danged old liar! He smiled.

But when he rode into his own yard, his smile died. Two saddled horses stood ground-hitched in front of his cabin. Two men loafed beside the door, waiting for him. Brief panic gripped Bart Sampson. One was the sheriff!

"Howdy, Bart," said Sheriff Jim White. "Been out huntin' wild hosses, huh? Any luck?"

"None, Jim. Wil' as thistle-down." Bart Sampson looked at the second man: wizened, dried-up Shorty English, ramrod for the Z Bar 7, a local iron. "Off your range, huh, Shorty?"

The sheriff spoke. "Shorty rode into town for me a few hours ago. He wanted me to come out here with him 'cause he figured you might get mad at him an' go for your irons against him."

Sampson scowled. "What're you talkin' about? Me an' Shorty's et too many times outa the same mess wagon to pull on each other, huh, Shorty?"

"Yeah," muttered Shorty, "but when a man loses his wheat field, like you done, it might drive him kinda ore-eyed, I'd reckon."

There was something here Bart Sampson did not understand. "Min' explainin' yourself, Shorty?"

"My Z Bar 7 hands was hazin' some cattle along your fence. One throwed

a cigaret away an' caught your wheat on fire . . ."

He said more, but Bart Sampson wasn't listening. Something inside his head was spinning, throwing his thoughts off track. So Fred Maguire hadn't burned his wheat! And he'd killed Fred Maguire—

By sheer power, he grouped his thoughts. He was still in the clear. Nobody would ever know he killed Maguire.

"Shorty'll pay you for your loss," said the sheriff.

"Sure will, Bart. Name your figure."

Bart Sampson's brain had steadied. He'd act natural and when the sheriff left he'd pull out of the country—No, no use in doing that—people would be suspicious of him then and if the law picked him up—

"I'll have to figure out what it was worth. I'll let you know in a day or two. That okay, Shorty?"

"Suits me, Bart. Danged sorry, fellow. But, an accident. . . . Well, gotta get to the herd. So long."

"So long."

The cowman loped away. The sheriff wiped his forehead. "Sure glad you didn't get mad, Bart. Bet you figured ol' Fred Maguire had burned your wheat, huh?"

"Well, I didn't know."

"Reckon I better mosey on, Bart. Hey, who's that a-comin'?"

"Looks like Maguire's cook, sheriff."

"Now what's he doin' over here?"

Face tight, Sampson wondered the same question. The cook pulled in, a six-shooter in his paw. "Arrest Sampson, sheriff!" he hollered.

SAMPSON had his hands on his guns, fingers tight on the hard handles. He had not seen the cook's .45 because the man had had that hand hanging at his side, hidden when he had rode up.

Sheriff Jim White scowled. "You crazy, Smoky? Why would I arrest—"

"He jus' murdered Fred Maguire!"

Sampson's breath caught, held. Wild fear surged through him. Could he pull his guns and outshoot this

cook? But he had searched the Maguire buildings and the cook had been on roundup. . . . He saw through it, then.

The cook had come in and found Maguire's body. Probably had come to the home-ranch for some supplies with a pack-horse. On the way in he had seen the burned wheat field. He had put two and two together.

"I was headin' into town for you," said the cook hurriedly. "I met Jim Carson. He said you was goin' this way. You goin' arrest Sampson? Maguire's dead!"

"Hold on," said the sheriff. "Quiet down!"

"You're crazy—you're loco!" Bart Sampson made his voice even. "I jus' come from my horse camp. Shorty English jus' tol' me that his hands accidently burned down my wheat—"

"I saw you kill Maguire!"

Sheriff Jim White looked at Bart Sampson. "What's this fellow talkin' about, Bart?"

"I dunno." Bart Sampson spoke slowly but haste pulled inside of him. He looked at the gun in the cook's rock-hard fist. Could he draw and outshoot him—? No, he knew he couldn't.

"Sampson thought I wasn't there; he thought Jim Maguire was alone. I saw him—I followed him—saw him kill Maguire. Never gave him a

chance. Saw it through a hay-window—You see when he searched the ranch, he didn't search the root-cellar. Set against the hill—only a dug-out in the brush—But I saw him, sheriff!"

The lawman glared at Bart Sampson.

"I was hidin' in the root cellar . . . saw Sampson sneak in. . ."

Bart Sampson said hoarsely, "Root cellar? When did you build a root—? He stopped suddenly. So the cook had not been on roundup! He remembered the fire in the stove. . . . Maguire had not been burning trash!

A terrible scene flashed across Bart Sampson's mind. The man he had seen hanged! His body falling; the rope snapping. The heavy knot, thick with coils, breaking the man's neck.

Desperately, Bart Sampson pulled his guns! Sheriff White swung, his knuckles crashing against Sampson's jaw, knocking him cold from saddle. "The dirty murderer!" gritted the lawman. "With the evidence you got, Smoky, we'll hang him!"

Smoky looked down at the inert Sampson. "Man, you pack an awful wallop, sher'ff! An' fast—I never even had time—Hang him, you say? Now won't a rope look good aroun' his bull-neck, I ask you!"

(THE END)

★ BUY ★
VICTORY
★ BONDS ★



Funeral O'Neill

Devil's Undertaker

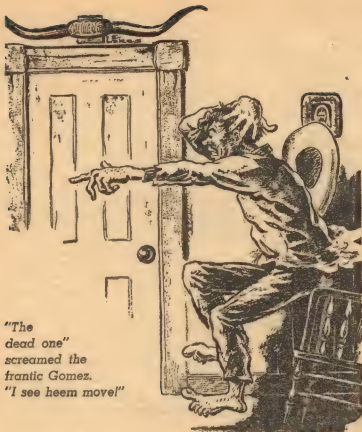
It was no accident that Ringbone Smith's office blew up when Jimmy South was in it, but Smith and his partner, Funeral O'Neill, had to find out why.

THE cowboy's corpse was a mess. After the outlaw bronc had thrown him, the horse had stomped and kicked him. Bony Funeral O'Neill, hardened by years as an undertaker, was studying the inert body, wondering just where to begin, when the cow-town of Boxelder, Montana, rocked to the concussion of a heavy explosion.

"Now what the hades?" growled

the lanky undertaker. "Must've been some powder out in one of the powder-pits that's exploded." Gold mining was going full blast in the Bearpaws to the south, and some of the mining company stored their powder in pits out of town a ways.

Outside, townspeople were moving on the street, and excited fists pounded on the undertaker's door. "Lemme in, Funeral! My office—an'



*"The
dead one"
screamed the
frantic Gomez.
"I see heem move!"*

Here
is
a
salty
novel
featuring
Funeral
O'Neill
and
Ringbone
Smith

By
LEE
FLOREN

young Jimmy South—got blowed up—!"

Funeral opened the door. "Too bad you weren't in the office," he growled good-naturedly.

But heavy-set Ringbone Smith's face held no signs of trickery. "I'm not rawhidin' you!" he said hoarsely. "That explosion was in my office, Funeral! Come on, fella!"

Dour face set, Funeral O'Neill glanced at the dead cowboy. "Reckon he'll have to wait." Now he was striding down the street, his long legs taking one stride to the veterinarian's two. "How come you weren't in your office, Ringbone?"

"Been out to Jens O'Laherty's farm doctorin' a sick milk cow. I left young Jimmy here to run things until I got back. Jus' as I rode into town, I heard the roar an' there goes the sides of my office, bulgin' out an' then settlin' back. An' Cy Barker

come runnin' to tell me Jimmy was in there."

"What'd you suppose—? You never had no explosives in there, did you?"

"No!"

Ringbone's office, a frame building, still stood upright but was rather shaky on its foundation leaning to the port side. The partners pushed through the crowd, entered through the doorway with its door hanging on one hinge, and stopped beside the three townsmen and Sheriff Dunlap who knelt beside the young man who lay on the floor.

"He alive?" asked Funeral.

Sheriff Dunlap replied. He was a man of limited intelligence—very limited. "I dunno, Funeral."

"Well, feel his pulse, damn it!" Funeral took the youth's limp wrist. Although twenty-three, Jimmy South looked like he was only nineteen or

so—now his face was blackened with soot and his clothes torn. "He's got plenty of pulse."

"Thank God," breathed Ringbone Smith.

"What happened?" asked Sheriff Dunlap, scowling.

Doc Smithers came through the crowd, knelt beside Jimmy. This would be hard on Alice South, thought Funeral. She and Jimmy had been married while Jimmy was a junior at the state college, and their first baby was six months old.

"We better get him to bed," said Doc Smithers. "Alex and John, get him by the shoulders and feet, and follow me."

They carried Jimmy out. Doc Smithers stopped, peered at Funeral and Ringbone. "What caused the explosion?"

"You got me, doc," said Ringbone. Funeral's gaunt face was expressionless. The medico was silent, eyes thoughtful. "I suppose somebody has notified Alice. Jimmy has a few burns, but it's what was hurt inside that I'm afraid of. Good luck this office was made out of clapboard. If it had had solid walls, the explosion would have stayed in."

Ringbone spoke testily. "Wouldn't say nothin' about offices, doc, considerin' the build of that hen-house you got your shingle on!"

"Can the talk," growled Sheriff Dunlap.

THE medico left. Funeral walked around the wreckage. "Looks like a slaughterhouse."

The undertaker was right. Evidently Jimmy had been doctoring an animal when the explosion had occurred. Funeral picked up a hoof and studied it, cast it aside, then looked at a piece of hide.

"Goat," he muttered. "Jimmy must've been doctorin' a goat, I reckon. Manuel Gomez is the only person who owns a goat, that I know of." He looked at Ringbone. "You know of any other goats around here?"

Ringbone chewed a peppermint thoughtfully. "No, Manuel has the only goats I know of."

Sheriff Dunlap said, "I'm goin' see if Jimmy can talk to me," and left.

A girl of about twenty-one, carrying a baby, entered. "What in heaven's name happened, Mr. O'Neill?"

Funeral shook his head sourly. "Darned if I'd know, Alice." He saw that she had been crying. "Now you buck up, honey, an' ride a stiff horse. Jimmy'll come out all right."

"I—I hope so. Mr. Smith, I'm sure glad you weren't in here when— But you an' Jimmy never had any powder around, did you?"

"Nary a grain," growled Ringbone savagely. "Somebody's dynamited this outfit, an' they'll pay through the snozzle!"

Alice said, "I'd better get back to Jimmy," and left.

"Who would dynamite this shack?" demanded Funeral. "You ain't got no enemies—leastwise, none that hate you enough to do a trick like this—an' Jimmy's only been practicin' with you such a short time he ain't had time to get anybody's antipathy."

Ringbone mouthed another peppermint. "I sure don't know," he was forced to admit. "But how did this goat come in here? When I left this mornin', Jimmy was without an animal to work on."

Funeral lit his pipe. "What gets me, Ringbone, is why was this goat blown to bits? The explosion crushed Jimmy, but this goat was blown to smithereens."

"This," stated Ringbone, "sounds like a bad dream."

But it wasn't. "Does Manuel Gomez ever have you work on his sick goats?"

Ringbone shook his head. "This is the first time one of his goats has been in my shop, Funeral."

Puzzled, they went outside, going toward the hotel, where Doc Smithers had put Jimmy to bed. They met Sheriff Dunlap. "Doc won't let me talk to Jimmy, men. He says the kid ain't able to talk. I'm goin' back an' look at your office again, Ringbone."

Ringbone grunted, "You won't need a key to get in, fella."

A slender, well-dressed man of about forty stopped them. "What happened, men?" He was dark, with a small mustache over his thin upper lip.

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"Your guess is as good as mine," growled Funeral.

Anger ran across the swarthy face: "I asked you a civil question, Mister, an' I expect a civil answer!"

"Go ask somebody else, Montrose!" growled the undertaker. "An' keep your lip to yourself, or I'll see that you do!" The rawboned man's nerves were raw.

Montrose murmured, "Sorry, O'Neill," yet his eyes smoldered.

They went down Boxelder's main street. "Never did like that oily Montrose son," growled Funeral O'Neill. "Nor that foreman of his, Slim Caldwell. Fact is, I can't imagine Montrose runnin' a dairy, can you?"

"Sig Montrose has been in this country for about six months," answered Ringbone Smith. "Came right after the mines started boommin' an' the miners moved in with their families. He's makin' a gob of money with that dairy, fellow. Milk sellin' at a dollar a quart to them minin' families with all their kids. Robbin' 'em because he's got the only milk cows! He'll step out of here with a small fortune, I tell you."

"Don't like him, Ringbone. Too citified, too oily."

Doc Smithers met them at the door of Jimmy's room. "Can't let you disturb him, men. He's asleep now, under a shot in the arm. I've dressed his burns—they were minor—and I hope he isn't bruised inside."

"Has he told you what happened?" asked Funeral.

"No, he isn't logical in his speech. He mentioned something about 'a clock,' but I think he was just talking out of his head, sirs."

Funeral nodded. What was behind this explosion, anyway? He and Ringbone found seats in the share of the Mercantile. Ringbone chewed a peppermint thoughtfully. "We got to work back on this proposition, Funeral. Now why would anybody want to get rid of Jimmy, an' who would that person be?"

"Damned if I'd know of anybody, Ringbone. That goat puzzles me; he was blown to pieces, like the explosion had occurred under him." He

got to his feet. "Let's ride out an' conflag with that Mex, Gomez."

MANUEL GOMEZ lived a few miles south of Boxelder, along Boxelder creek. When the partners rode into the pard in front of the log cabin two *muchachos* ran ahead of them hollering, "Veeseetors, papa, veeseetors!" Funeral counted four other children, varying in ages, that peeped at them from the old barn. Mama Gomez came to the door, carrying her latest baby.

"Papa? Oh, heem asleep, down by the reever. Manuel, company you have!"

"I come, Margerita."

Manuel Gomez, dark hair disorderly, came out of the brush. He wore tattered overalls and was barefoot and without a shirt. "A man cannot sleep no longer," he grumbled. "There are too many keeds."

"When and why did you bring that goat into my office?" asked Ringbone.

The wiry Mexican stared. "Am I heareeng arights? Or am I still asleep? *Carramba*, my goats they are een the heels, not een your place."

"One of them ain't in the hills," corrected Funeral.

The Mexican scowled deeply. "Concho," he said, speaking to his oldest, a nine-year-old-boy. "The goats, they are all een the heels, yes?"

"Si, papa. They all there. Thees mornin', I put them there. Then an hour ago, I count them."

Ringbone looked inquiringly at Funeral. The undertaker said, "*Gracias*, Manuel," and the partners rode off. Manuel watched them, blinking and scratching his head in wonderment. A few minutes later, the partners were counting the goats that ranged along the foothills.

"Twelve," said Ringbone.

They rode to a cabin along the creek. A miner was washing a sandbar. Funeral said, "Howdy, Clem, hope you're hittin' somethin'." He turned in saddle and sniffed. "Smell them goats even this far away, huh? How many goats that Mex got, anyway?"

"Counted them yesterday," replied

Clem. "He's got too many—jus' thirteen."

Funeral nodded. "Good pannin', Clem."

They rode on. Ringbone chewed, said, "An' we only counted twelve. That Mex an' his kid was lyin' to us—but why?"

Funeral made no answer as he loaded his pipe. There were a few numbers but he couldn't add them up. The whole thing was crazy—the whole setup was absurd. Yet Jimmy was in bed with burns and concussion and Ringbone Smith's veterinary office was a wreck from a mysterious explosion. And the remains of a blasted goat were splattered around the office's wobbly interior.

But there was more than a monetary loss to this. He and Ringbone had helped Jimmy through school, for the kid had wanted all his life to be a veterinarian. They had taken him from a drunken, no-good father and a whining mother and sent him to school. And now—

Funeral O'Neill's gaunt face was set determinedly.

SIG MONTROSE stood across the street, watching them. Funeral O'Neill saw Montrose's dairy foreman, Slim Caldwell, standing in front of the Ace-Down Saloon. Caldwell was a slender, quick-moving man who always packed a gun. And the undertaker couldn't see why a dairy hand would need a six-shooter.

Caldwell asked, "Been out ridin', huh?"

Funeral nodded; Ringbone was silent. They went to Doc Smithers' office, but the medico was at the hotel with Jimmy South. They went in and stood silently beside the bed, looking at the bandaged face of the youth.

Jimmy's eyes opened and Funeral O'Neill saw them light up a little. Then they went blank again, the light going out like a kerosene lamp in a high wind.

"Goat . . . Gomez . . . a clock."

Funeral glanced at Ringbone Smith, noting the vet's look of puzzlement. They went outside, where

they met Sheriff Dunlap. "What'd you know?" asked Funeral.

Dunlap scowled. "Not much. Not anythin', in fact."

"Somebody has tried to murder Jimmy," declared Funeral O'Neill. "They bungled the job, and they might try again. Keep a deputy with him all the time until he gets well enough to talk. See that nobody gets into his room 'cept Doc an' us two an' Alice an' the baby."

Dunlap's eyes narrowed. "You're barkin' up a bad tree, Funeral."

"Station a guard," snapped Funeral.

They went outside. "Now what does he mean by a 'clock'?" asked Ringbone. "He mentioned Gomez, an' I still figure that Mex brought that goat in. But why would he lie to us?"

Funeral had no answer to that. This was a puzzle, no two ways about it, and he didn't know where to begin or where it would end. He did know one thing: he'd find out, sooner or later, who had blown Jimmy up—and that party would pay plenty.

"You got me, Ringbone."

Puzzled, they sat in the shade, thinking. A goat . . . Gomez . . . a clock. "How many different kinds of clocks are there?" asked Funeral.

Ringbone looked at him as though questioning his sanity. He enumerated the makes and models of clocks: Grandfather clocks, striking clocks, alarm clocks. And, he added, the miners used a certain type of clock.

Funeral's ears pricked up. "An' that clock?"

"Never had seen one, pard. But they say they are small clocks, sellin' for quite a sum. They set them an' then get away from a dynamite charge an' the clock sets the powder off at a certain time. They bury the clock so it won't get blowed up an' when they clean the charge away they get the clock again."

Funeral leaned back. He said slowly, "I think I got it, now. That goat has come into the shop with a charge of dynamite under his belly an' a clock on it to set it off. The whole thing exploded and—"

"Come again," grinned Ringbone. "That ain't logical."

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Blue Ribbon Western

"You got the brains of a gnat," growled the undertaker. "Did you take a second look at Manuel Gomez' goats? They're angora goats an' the fur on 'em is six inches long, 'specially along the belly. A man could hide a stick of dynamite in there an' one of these small clocks, set the time an' take the goat into your office. That goat wasn't crushed; he was blown apart."

"Could be done," grudgingly admitted the vet.

"Let's look that office of your'n over again."

Sig Montrose stood on the corner.

"How's the kid, men?"

"He'll come out," said Funeral.

Montrose asked, "Has he been able to talk yet, an' tell what happened?"

The man's smoothness grated against Funeral O'Neill like rough sandpaper, and he didn't know just why. The undertaker spoke slowly. "You seem interested in Jimmy, Montrose, an' I'm wonderin' why?"

MONTROSE shrugged his shoulders. "He worked on a cow of mine a time or two, an' he's a good vet. Purely an inquiry based on friendship, O'Neill. Of course, if you don't take it that way—"

Funeral cut in. "Just why are you runnin' that dairy anyway? You're no farmer, Montrose!"

"My business is my own affair!" snapped the well-dressed man. "With milk selling for a dollar a quart in the camps, each cow is worth aroun' twenty dollars a day. Multiply that by one hundred cows a day!"

"Quite a graft, robbin' those babies!" said the undertaker.

Montrose drew back, his eyes level again. "Your opinion, sir."

Ringbone tugged his partner's arm. "Come along, Funeral."

They went down the street with Funeral muttering, "I'd like to take that city guy apart an' see what makes him tick—" The word *tick* made him think of a miner's clock. The mail had just come in and they entered the postoffice.

"I put Jimmy South's mail in your box, Ringbone," stated the postmaster. "Figured he might want you to get it."

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

Ringbone sorted through the ads and letters. Finally he came to one from the State Board of Health, Helena, Montana, addressed to Dr. James South. He scowled and showed it to Funeral. He pointed out that it also bore the title: State Veterinarian, Northern District, Montana.

"When did Jimmy get that title?"

"Darned if I'd know, Funeral. He must've done that on the q.t., I reckon. Dang, that kid is a pusher; gettin' in good with the State Department. We better open it, huh, 'cause it might be important mail an' I might be able to answer it." He tore the envelope open.

They read:

Helena, Montana.
July 16, 1901.

Dear Dr. South:

I was very interested in your letter of July 10, stating that you suspected local cattle of having the "slobbers," which is, as you know, a form of anthrax.

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Sincerely yours,
Dr. J. C. Mullins,
State Veterinarian.

"I don't get it," said Ringbone. "I don't know of a case of 'slobber' in this section, yet Jimmy must've mentioned it to Dr. Mullins."

"Range aroun' here is healthy, ain't it?"

Ringbone nodded, puzzled. "It's beyond me, Funeral."

They went to Ringbone's office. "Good luck I had it insured," said the vet. The curious townspeople had all left so they had the wreckage to themselves. They found additional bits of the goat and Ringbone mentally measured some of the fur, judging it to run around six inches or so. "Nothin' else here, Funeral."

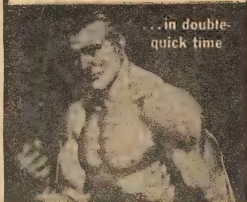
"Wait a minute, Ringbone."

The undertaker had found a piece of metal. A shiny piece of steel. It

(Continued On Page 94)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 93)

lay against the wall, and beside it was a piece of spring. Parts of a clock that had been blasted to bits in the explosion.

"I never had no clock in here," said Ringbone.

Funeral sucked his cold pipe in deep thought. "Well, that's what happened, pard. This dynamite was hidden in the goat's fur an' this clock was with it. Small charge of powder an' a small clock. An' then it popped!"

"But who would want Jimmy dead?"

They were right back where they started. "Wonder if we could find out who bought the clock?" asked the undertaker.

THEY took the parts to the only hardware store that also handled the powder sales to the miners. The clerk studied the shiny part for some time. "That came from one of the clocks we sold," he stated. "We got in some very small clocks in square cases, and this is one. They came in last week."

"Are they all sold?" asked Funeral.

"All sold. The Yankee Doodle Mine bought them all—all ten of them." The clerk toyed with the metal. "Where did you get this?"

"Keep this under your Stetson, Hank."

The clerk had known them for years. "As you say, Funeral."

They went to the town livery barn where they saddled their horses. Ringbone Smith rode a sturdy black gelding that, according to him, had three gait: walk, stumble and fall down. Funeral O'Neill rode his slim buckskin mare. That horse, he said, had attended more funerals than most people.

The afternoon sun was hot and their bronses were sweating in a few miles. The Yankee Doodle Mine was about fifteen miles to the south in the pine and fir. They rode at a fast clip, pressing their bronses. Matt Klingdon, the mine foreman, sat in front of his frame office, whittling on a stick. They exchanged greetings and he had his clerk bring out some ice water. "You didn't ride out here for your health," he said.

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

Funeral asked about the clocks.

"Yeah, we bought 'em all, men." He turned to his clerk. "How many of them clocks have we got left, Ike?"

The clerk consulted some papers. "We've sent seven into the mine, boss, so that leaves three left. They're in the store-room." "Check that, will you?" asked Ringbone.

"Hell, they're there, men." Nevertheless, the clerk went into the store-room, which was presided over by a supply-checker. When he came back he said, "There are only two there, boss. I must've counted wrong when I went through my requests."

"There has to be a written request for each clock," explained Matt Klingdon. "Ike's jus' counted wrong."

But Ike hadn't counted wrong. Though he checked his requests four times, only seven clocks had been issued to miners—and that should have left three in storage, and there were only two.

"A fellow could reach across the counter an' grab one," grumbled the supply-checker, "When I go back for a new pick or spade, then a man could stretch across that counter—a guy with a long reach—an' pick off one of those clocks."

Funeral O'Neill mentally measured the distance across the counter and agreed with the clerk. Matt Klingdon kept insisting there was a mistake in bookkeeping. The partner left. They were going down the grade when they met the milk wagons coming from Montrose's dairy. Slim Caldwell rode beside the lead wagon.

"Deliverin' the milk," he said, grinning. "How come you men out in this wilderness?"

Funeral O'Neill mentally weighed his seemingly casual question, trying to probe into it for some hidden meaning.

"You ask a lot of questions, Caldwell, an' that's a right bad habit in this country."

Caldwell's grin widened, but was still without mirth. "Been in this section some months, an' my tongue ain't got me into no trouble yet. How's young Jimmy?"

(Continued On Page 96)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 95)

"Another question. . . ." muttered Funeral. He swung his bronc without answering and rode toward Boxelder, Ringbone following him. The vet was chewing seriously on a peppermint, his heavy forehead wearing a deep scowl. Caldwell sat his horse and watched them ride off; a cynical smile on his lips.

"I don't cotton to that hellion," growled the veterinarian. "Long string of water, with them long danglin' arms—" His scowl grew. "He goes to the mine each day with that milk, an' maybe he's the gent that reached across that counter an' speared that clock."

"Could be, Ringbone." Funeral swung his horse east. "What say we ride over an' take a look at Montrose's dairy?"

"What good'll that do us?"

"Maybe not any. . . ."

THE dairy-hands were feeding the cows. They had milked early to make the evening delivery at the Yankee Doodle. Montrose saw them from the house and came down to where they sat their broncs beside the long barn.

"Something you men want?"

"Just ridin' through," murmured Funeral O'Neill, "an' we thought we might look over your spread here. Got quite a few nice-lookin' milk cows, I see."

Montrose looked at them. "Yeah, nice cows. Healthy stock, too."

Ringbone could hear some cows mooing somewhere. And, because of his trained ear, he could detect pain in their bawling. The cows were locked in a closed barn off by itself.

"What's wrong with those cows?" asked the vet.

"Got tangled up in some barbwire," growled Montrose. "Four of them, down on my lower pasture—tried to get through the fence. We got them purty well doctored up, now. We're letting them go dry."

Ringbone nodded. Montrose did not ask him to look at the cows and the vet made no offer to inspect them. The cows munching hay along the stanchions looked like a healthy bunch.

(Continued On Page 98)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 96)

"Nice cattle," murmured Funeral.

They rode off, heading toward Boxelder. Montrose watched them leave, finally went into the barn. Funeral looked at his squat partner. "See anythin' out of place, Ringbone?"

"Those cows looked healthy enough."

Funeral sighed. "Reckon we'll have to try to trace some powder sales down an' maybeso found out who bought some powder lately." They reached town and went to the hardware store. "Who's bought powder off'n you lately?"

"Almost everybody," said the clerk. He tossed out a tablet. "Accordin' to law, I have to keep track of the sales. Here they are." He went to wait on a prospector. Funeral and Ringbone went down the list of customers slowly.

"Just the miners an' the local minin' companies," grunted Ringbone.

Funeral's finger stabbed at a name. "Slim Caldwell, maybe?"

Ringbone read, "Burl Caldwell. Wonder if that is Slim?" He called to the clerk. "'Member this sale?"

"Sure, that's Slim Caldwell, Sig Montrose's milk-boss. Yeah, he bought one stick of dynamite. Claimed he wanted to blow out a stump on their pasture."

"A long stick?" asked Funeral. "Or a short stick?"

The clerk smiled. "What kind of a game is this, Undertaker?" He consulted the book closely. "A short stick, the shortest I had."

Funeral glanced knowingly at Ringbone Smith, who was chewing slowly on a peppermint. They went outside. Ringbone said, "Oh, so that's it, huh? But why would Caldwell an' Montrose want to blow up Jimmy?" Suddenly he remembered the sick cows hidden in the barn on the dairy. "Wonder if those cows were wire-cut? 'Member that letter Jimmy got from Helena? Mentioned the slobbers in it..."

"Let's talk with Alice."

ALICE was at home in their small log house on the outskirts of Boxelder. The baby was beginning

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

to creep. Funeral picked up the child and held him. "Has Jimmy been out to Montrose's dairy lately, Alice?"

"I don't know."

Ringbone said, "He got his mail in my box today; the postmaster put it there because Jimmy's sick. He had a letter from the Helena office, something about the slobbers in local cattle. I never knew he had got the appointment as state vet for this district."

Alice spoke slowly. "We intended to keep it a surprise from you, Ringbone. You see, Jimmy was working on some case—sick cattle, he said—but he would not tell me what it was or who owned the cattle. He said he'd tell me later after he cleared up some disease, and he said this was big. Why, you don't think—?"

"Who owned these cattle?" asked Funeral.

"I don't know. Jimmy never told me. If he could talk, he'd tell you."

"But he can't talk for some time," said Funeral, long face dour.

They went outside, both silent. Funeral lit his pipe. "Twenty dollars a day from a cow makes one hundred an' forty bucks a week. Multiply that by one hundred and you've got fourteen thousand a week from Sig Montrose's herd. He makes more dinero than any miner."

Ringbone was solemn. "I'd like to take a look at those 'wire-cut' cows of his. They might have the slobbers an' he's locked them apart to try to keep the rest of his herd from havin' the disease. An' if he's sellin' milk to those kids from those sick cows—"

Sheriff Dunlap came running down the alley, almost colliding with the partners. "See a man runnin' this direction?"

"Only you," said Funeral, grinning.

"This ain't no jokin' matter!" snapped the lawman. "Me, I was up in Jimmy's room with Doc Smithers, an' we seen a man on the opposite roof, hidin' behin' the false-front. He had a short-gun an' I shot twice at him, an' he ran. Jus' a minute or two ago, it was."

"So that's what those shots were," said Funeral. "Figured at the time it was some kids shootin' ducks along

(Continued On Page 100)

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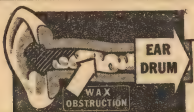
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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 99)

the creek. You get to see this fellow's face, Dunlap?"

The lawman shook his homely head. "Nope, he had too much of him hid behin' the wall of the store. He dropped to the ground an' I ran down the back of the hotel after him, an' I ain't seen him since." His voice trembled with emotion. "You know, I gotta hunch somebody's really out to kill Jimmy South?"

"You keep close tab on him!" snapped Funeral O'Neill.

Dunlap hurried off down the alley, gun out. Ringbone growled, "That star-man ain't got sense enough to pound a picket-pin into a snowdrift. Maybe we better take spells a-settin' with Jimmy?"

"Dunlap'll take care of that. I need some tobacco."

They went into the Mercantile. While the clerk was getting the undertaker some Prince Albert, Slim Caldwell came through the back door that led to the alley. He was breathing a little heavy, Funeral thought.

"Thought you were out to the Yankee Doodle," said Funeral.

Caldwell growled, "This is a free country, body-snatcher, an' a man can do what he pleases an' ride where he likes, I reckon." He did not buy anything; he went out the front door.

"Civil customer," said the clerk.

Outside, Funeral said, "Well, there's the gent Dunlap was chasin', Ringbone. Notice that smear of tar on his sleeve? He got that from that roof, I'd say."

Ringbone started toward Caldwell, now entering a saloon. "I'll tend to that slim son, Funeral! While I'm handlin' him, you go get Dunlap!"

"Hold up, partner!" Funeral's bony hand grabbed the veterinarian's stocky shoulder. "How could we prove he was the gent? We couldn't do it, could we? So, let's leave him ride, for the moment."

"But—"

"Dunlap'll watch Jimmy closer now, he may be dumb but he's got that much brain. An' we can't go into this thing half-cocked. We got to play our cards close an' have absolute evidence or Montrose might get wise an' jump the coop."

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

"How we goin' get this evidence?"

"I figure that Mex, Manuel Gomez, was lyin' to us—I think he knows that Montrose got hold of one of his goats. What say we pay him a visit?"

"Make him talk, huh? Why, hades, we don't need to ride out to his farm, I jus' saw him in the Adobe Hut. Drinkin' beer in there when we went by. That beer'll drive him out in the back purty soon. You know, that fellow is ascared to death, they tell me, of seein' a ghost. Seems as if a fellow he hated said once he'd come back an' haunt him, an' Manuel is ignorant enough to believe it."

THEY hunkered behind the Adobe Hut. Mexicans came and went, and about ten minutes passed before Manuel Gomez, weaving slightly from a mixture of muscatel wine and high-power beer, came down the path.

Funeral nabbed the Mexican from behind, his hand clamping over the fellow's mouth. He dragged him back behind some buildings. "You come with us, *sabe?*"

"Where we go, huh?"

"See a dead man."

The Mexican hollered, "I don't wanna see—" Funeral's hand clamped over the man's lips, stopped the shouting. They carried him the half-block to Funeral's undertaking parlor and there the bony undertaker dumped him hard in a chair.

"What you want, huh?"

"What became of that goat, Manuel?"

"What goat? My goats, they all at home. They good goats, they no stray. What's that under that sheet?" He pushed a trembling finger toward the sheet-covered corpse of the cowboy killed by the crazed outlaw bronc.

"Him ghost," grunted Ringbone. "Him look dead, but he walks sometimes. We keep him here to study him." He threw back the sheet and the waxen face of the dead man, the head lying on one ear, looked directly into the Mexican's terror-widened brown eyes, the eyes of the dead man open and without expression.

Manuel gurgled, collapsed in his chair. Ringbone slipped into the next room, donned a sheet, and listened to

(Continued On Page 102)

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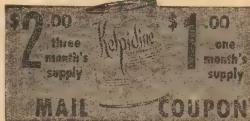
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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 101)

Funeral slap the Mexican's face to bring him to. Finally, when he heard the undertaker and the Mexican talking, he slipped into the darkened room, entirely covered by the sheet.

The Mexican screeched, and passed out.

Ringbone went back into the room, discarded the sheet, and when Manuel Gomez came out of it, the veterinarian was sitting beside him. "What happened to you?" asked Ringbone.

The Mexican's voice wavered. Sweat stood like raindrops on his dark forehead. "That fellow—him a ghost—"

"You're loco," declared Funeral. "There hasn't been a ghost in this room. Look, that dead man's still on the slab. Fact is, we covered his face, see?" He added, "Tell us about that goat. Montrose got him from you, huh?"

The Mexican was staring at the sheet-covered corpse. While he had been out, Funeral had tied a string to the dead man's ear. Now, unnoticed by Manuel Gomez, he pulled it slowly. The head, under the sheet, moved with a deliberate motion.

"He—he ees moveing, senores! He ees comin' alive, no!"

Funeral let the string go slack. "He's a funny man, Manuel. One day a man was lying to me an' the ghost got up an' fought with him. He hates a liar, I guess. But get back to this goat. Did Montrose pay you for him?"

THE Mexican was blubbing, lips slack. "Eet ees like thees senores! Last night, I go after goats, see. They had already been milked, but one of them she was not well, an' I go to check on hees health."

"I see."

"That ghost, he move, no?"

"No," gritted Ringbone Smith. "Talk, compadre, an' tell the truth. For if you don't, the ghost he walk to you an' choke you! An' his fingers are cold and like steel, I tell you!"

"I tell all, tell the truth. Well, I see Montrose an' that hombre of his, the man weeth the beeg horse-peestol—they steal one of my goats. First, I

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

want to say, 'Holla, don't take my Juan!', but I change my ideas when I see that beeg peestol. So I let them takes Juan—that was the goat's name—an' when you ride out today, I afraid to tell you what I seen." He crossed himself and fell to weeping.

Ringbone slapped him hard. "What did they do with the goat?"

"That I do not know, *senores*. I followed them to their cow-milkeen' ranch, an' they took Juan there, an' no more do I see of her. Maybe now they roast him on the peet, with the hope of eatin' him?"

"He ain't on their spittle," growled Funeral. He thought of Juan's remains scattered around Ringbone's wrecked office. All they had here was evidence that Montrose and Caldwell had stolen the goat. But how could they prove the pair had taken him into Ringbone's office?

"That ghost," he said. "He moved just then, Manuel. Are you sure you are telling all?"

"That Montrose, she weel keel me, *senores*. But I want to steal Juan back, an' I hide there all night. But they watch Juan. Thees morneeng they breeng Juan to town, an' when Jeemy South step out of his office a minute, they push Juan een the back door. Then soon the explosion she occur."

"They work on Juan's belly any? Act like they were milkin' her?" asked Funeral.

The Latin shook his head. "No, not that I see." Plainly he was speaking the truth. "Maybe they do that at the cow-farm, no? I heard the cows bawlin' out there—some of them are in pains, seek cows."

"What'll we do with this fellow?" asked Ringbone.

"Lock me ups," begged the Mexican. "For eef you do not, then the man weeth the horse-peestol weel keel me! An' then who weel take the cares of Pablo an' Maria an' Carlos an' Pepito an' Enrique an'—"

Going down alleys, they reached the jail unnoticed. Here Funeral had the jailer put the trembling Mexican into a cell. "He's got the d.t.'s," explained the undertaker. "He's been seein' ghosts he claims."

(Continued On Page 104)



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(Continued From Page 103)

"Drinkin' some of the Adobe's alkali water," grumbled the jailer. "We ain't got a padded cell but this one ought to do. Get in, Manuel."

"You do not notifiys my meesus, please. Eef she finds out I am in jails, she comes eento town weeth her washboard an' beats me!"

Funeral smiled. "She won't find out, Manuel."

THEY went outside with Ringbone Smith swearing under his breath. "Babies an' little children out to the minin' camp an' that dirty Montrose feedin' them contaminated milk from sick cows. What do you say all we know sums up to, Funeral?"

The gaunt mortician rubbed his bony jaw. "Well, we got a witness in Manuel. But it would clinch things if we could get Montrose into town on a charge of having sick cattle in his dairy. Then, when Jimmy comes out of it, we'll put this other charge against him. Now you're a veterinarian. . . can you go out and arrest Montrose and Caldwell and charge them with peddlin' contaminated milk?"

"My state license gives me that power, Funeral. And besides, my partner Jimmy is State Veterinarian for this district and I can also claim he gave me permission to make the arrest. But I don't think them two sons will give up very easy. They've got a fortune at stake."

Funeral scowled. "No use askin' Dunlap to help, though."

They got rifles and stuck them into saddle boots, after checking the Winchesters for loads. They got fresh horses and rode out, loping across the prairie toward the Bearpaws that rose out of the hills that sloped to the south.

Gaunt Funeral O'Neill rode high on his stirrups, bony hands braced flatly on his saddle-fork. His predatory face bleak, he gave this matter deep thought. Inside of him stirred a sullen anger. Because of Montrose's lust for money, Jimmy South lay in bed back in Boxelder. Powder-burned and unconscious. . . .

Similar thoughts deviled heavy Ringbone Smith. Thick jaws work-

(Continued On Page 106)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 104)

ing, the solid vet sat deep between horn and cantle, a part of his saddle. Dusk was coming in. And the veterinarian twisted and spoke to his silent companion.

"Was Slim Caldwell in town when we left?"

Funeral shook his dour head. "Rode out right after we seen him in the store. He headed for the dairy farm."

"He covers ground. . ."

They did not ride up to the dairy. They left their horses in the diamond willows along the creek, hidden by the high buckbrush and willows. They tied neckscarfs around their broncs' nostrils to keep them from whinnying. Then they pulled their rifles out of the leather scabbards and moved through the brush.

The Montrose dogs picked up their scent. They heard them barking; heard a man's harsh tones quietening them. They came to a spot behind the barn wherein they had heard the bawling of the sick cows. A dog started barking again, and they settled back.

"Ding bust ye, Shep, quit that infernal noise!"

"Probly smells another rabbit along the crick," said another man.

"Go get 'em, Shep."

The dog came into the brush, nose to the earth. He saw Ringbone and the vet called to him softly. Growling, the cur watched him suspiciously. Then he trotted up to the veterinarian who petted him. The dog, not much more than a pup, wanted to play.

"Go home," growled Ringbone.

The pup stopped, studied him. Ringbone threw a hunk of dirt at him and he trotted back to the barn, his curiosity satisfied. They watched the dog trot up to the house and lie down.

Squatting there, the partners studied the lay-out. Men were moving in the barn, and now and then a cow bawled.

"Follow me," grunted Funeral.

THEY ran across the clearing, flattened themselves against the barn holding the sick cattle. Evidently nobody had seen them for no din was

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

raised nor were any questions hurled their way.

Funeral grunted, "So far, so good."

They went to the door. The heavy cottonwood barrier was fixed closed with a small chain and a padlock. But they had expected it to be locked, and they were prepared. Ringbone took the hacksaw that hung from his gunbelt and while Funeral held the chain, he set to work on a link in it.

"Keep your eyes peeled, body-snatcher."

"Shut up an' saw."

The saw grated. The work seemed endless and any minute they expected to be detected. The sound of voices still went on in the barn. The dogs had ceased barking and now and then a cow bawled. Inside the small barn Ringbone heard the plaintive low moo of a cow and, because he knew cattle, he could detect pain in its texture.

Finally the link parted.

The door swung slowly inward with protesting oilless hinges. The interior was dark and they went inside, shutting the door behind them. Now their eyes, being used to the semi-darkness, made out the five cows tied to a manger. The sixth cow lay on her side in her stall.

The pungent odor of sick cattle assailed their nostrils. Funeral saw a milk stool hanging on the wall and the cows had small udders. They had been milked recently. Ringbone's curses were husky.

"Sick cows with anthrax, jus' as we suspected. An' by gad, they been milkin' them, too." He went to the cow that lay down and poked her with his rifle barrel. "One of them has died already."

"Can a man get anthrax from milk?"

"No, the disease is hard to transmit to man, but there have been cases where a child has contracted it. Anyway, the milk is not healthy."

"We got the evidence we need," grumbled Funeral O'Neill. "Now we'll slip up to the house an' arrest Sig Montrose before his men know we are on his property. We'll get him out the back an' into jail in town before they miss him. Unless

(Continued On Page 108)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 107)

we do it that way, his men might start some gun-play—"

"The gun-play," interrupted a cold voice, "is about ready to start!"

They turned, rifles rising. Montrose stood in the door, his legs spread wide. His .45 was rock-like in his fist. Beside him and a pace behind him stood Slim Caldwell, also holding a Colts.

Funeral was the first to speak. "You walk on light boots, you dirty dogs! An' you do a lot of ridin', Caldwell!"

"That's somethin' you won't do any more of!" growled the slim man.

Funeral's mind was running ahead, seeking a way out. He knew that if he and Ringbone tried to bring their rifles up, then Montrose and Caldwell would shoot. And, judging from the set expressions on their faces, they would shoot to kill.

Ringbone spoke. "You're under arrest, you two. As a licensed veterinarian, I hereby arrest you in the name of the State of Montana for harboring cattle bearing the terrible disease of anthrax."

"We've been under arrest before," said Sig Montrose. "You two ain't bustin' up my good game, I can tell you that."

Funeral O'Neill felt fear pull him. This pair could kill them, bury them back in the hills— He wondered if anybody had seen them leave Boxelder and ride to the dairy. He doubted that. Of course, Jimmy would be suspicious—and so would Manuel Gomez—but if they never found their bodies—

"Drop those rifles!" ordered Montrose.

THE gaunt undertaker knew that his only chance to live was to hang onto his rifle. For if he dropped it — Suddenly he eared back the hammer and let it fall. He shot swiftly, unexpectedly—and he shot from the hip. A wild shot with desperation behind it, but it paid.

The single rifle-ball hit Sig Montrose in the belly, turned him. For the second time in a few hours, another explosion occurred. Only this one, instead of being in Ringbone's

(Continued On Page 110)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 108)

office, was staged in a cow-barn. And instead of being a wild, uncontrolled explosion, this one came from belching, roaring guns.

Dropping to one knee, Funeral O'Neill dropped his rifle. At this short range, the long weapon would be too slow. Ringbone Smith's rifle spoke, and the undertaker saw Slim Caldwell shudder, stagger back.

A bullet went over the mortician and slapped into a cow who went down in bawling pain, kicking in death. Funeral saw Montrose's .45 snarl again as the man lay prone in the cow manure. Now his own .45 was out, the barrel rising hotly. He shot twice, the butt pounding his hand. Montrose lay still, face down.

Face gaunt, the undertaker wheeled his pistol, holding it on Slim Caldwell. But Caldwell was sitting down, his back against the wall, coughing with a deep sound. He looked like a bent, broken sack filled with wheat. His life was trickling out through his grimy hands at his chest.

"Don't shoot—Ringbone . . ."

Ringbone Smith leaned against a stall, face pale. Funeral went to him. "Where did he get you, friend?"

"My right leg—"

Slim Caldwell said, "T'he'll with you two," and leaned forward and died.

Hands were running toward the barn. Funeral helped Ringbone outside into the dusk. Now a group of horsemen came spilling across the creek, and Sheriff Dunlap rode at their lead. The Montrose hands saw the guns in the hands of the riders and stopped, standing in a tight group.

Dunlap growled, "You Montrose men make a move for your guns an' we'll ride you down with lead." His homely face showed a wide smile. "Jimmy came to and tol' us about this mess out here—Manuel Gomez talked, too. We heard gunfire. What happened?"

"Look inside."

The lawman dismounted, went into the barn, spurs jingling. Doc Smith-ers rode with the posse. He got Ringbone Smith on the ground, and

Funeral O'Neill, Devil's Undertaker

he and Funeral ripped off the vet's pants.

"Good luck they ain't no women aroun'," grinned the vet.

Doc Smithers' examination was brief. "He's got some meat tore out of his thigh, but something must have deflected the bullet a little. What's he got in his pants pocket?"

Funeral came out with a paper bag.

"My peppermints," said Ringbone.

The medico took out one of the peppermints, a bright green one. He bit into it and his teeth bounced back, it was so hard. "How do you chew these things?"

"Don't chew them—suck them. Here, give me one, fella. Tie some-
thin' aroun' my leg an' get me up—we got work to do. We gotta destroy these sick cattle an' test the others for disease." He added, "Wish Jimmy was here to help me."

"He'll be up tomorrow, I reckon."

Ringbone Smith looked at Funeral O'Neill. "I got something in my eye." Funeral dug into his eye.

Ringbone stuck a peppermint in his partner's mouth. "Chew on that," he said, grinning.

THE END

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The Road to Laramie

(Continued From Page 79)

hired, jus' like he hire zem two, Henk and Veck, to murder poor Meestair Hoosh and Conover, zen make it look like it vas me and my whip!"

Ezra started to laugh again. "Fixed everything oop like nozzing," he repeated, as delighted as a kid with a new toy at his mimicry. "When we bring in Stranch to Denver an' they take his confe-confeshon at sheriff's office, they wired on to the big bosh in Ch-Chicago. Yip-ee-ee!" He let go with a shrill cowboy yell. "Bosh saysh ol' Sam c'n have Stranch's job, too How'sh that?"

"An' Murph's movin' over on tuh Laramie route an' we've brang tuh Morgon hawshes tuh run it, sho's we c'n all make ze gamble like nozzink qveek, no, Murph?" He giggled and nudged his companion in the ribs.

"Bot yesh," the Cossack proclaimed. "And be near Mish Hoosh an' leetle wans. You vill drekn now, no, my frand Pat?" He ceremoniously passed the goatskin bag to Pat Stevens.

Pat grabbed the bag as though his life depended upon his getting a firm grip on it. He wasn't a drinking man, but this seemed to him to warrant an exception. He sat down on the ground and cuddled the bag against his knees, put his mouth to the opening, and began to drink in desperate haste. It had all the earmarks of a top-string celebration, provided he could ever catch up with his pardners.

(THE END)

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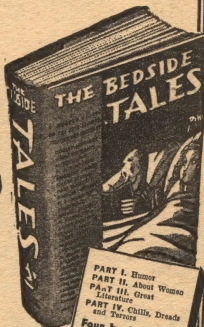
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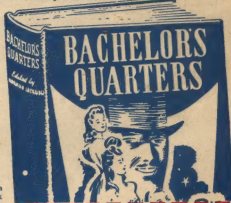
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